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ROBIN.

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.

BIBLIOTHECA
NOV 1882
BODLEIANA

LONDON:

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

Publishers in Ordinary to Her Majesty the Queen.

1882.

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251. k. 142.

ROBIN.

CHAPTER I.

JACK'S influence had a marked effect on his neighbours—people readily follow the lead of a good-looking, well-to-do bachelor. In most of the houses about Wadpole there were sons to push on, daughters to marry, or some sufficient reason for making it desirable to stand well in the good graces of the new Squire, who, before a month had gone by, had strained a great many points

to call on everybody worth knowing far and near. When Mr. and Mrs. Christopher Blunt were discussed — as discussed they were certain to be—Jack seized the opportunity of speaking of his former intimacy with Mrs. Blunt, that he had met a friend in her, and that her father, Aston Veriker, and he, while abroad, had seen an immense deal of one another.

Veriker! Was Mrs. Blunt a Miss Veriker, then? Oh, really! what, one of the Portsdown Verikers? Then, of course they must call; certainly, there could be no possible reason for not knowing her. And gradually in a very short time it seemed agreed, and by tacit consent, that Mrs. Blunt and her husband, Mr. Christopher Blunt, were to be recognised as members of Wadpole society.

Wishing it to be thoroughly understood—

more especially in the presence of the man so many of them up to now had ignored—that it was Mrs. Blunt who possessed the 'open sesame' to their intimacy, the callers each one repeated something said to them by the Squire.

Mr. Dorian-Chandos had spoken of Mrs. Blunt as being such a great friend of his, or Mr. Dorian-Chandos had seemed to speak with such regret of Mrs. Blunt's father; he said while they were abroad they were so very much together.

Honey to Robin, gall to old Blunt, who endured martyrdom in having to sit still and hear these praises given of the man whom, even dead, above all others he hated.

Rankling within him, they began to breed dislike of Robin. Instead of being beholden to him, the feeling forced on him was that he was being patronised because of her, was being

taken by the hand for the reason that his son—*his* son—was married to the daughter of that Veriker. Faugh! the very thought brought out the perspiration on Mr. Blunt's ample forehead. If he could only tell them, could only speak the things he knew, about that swindling, card-sharping vagabond. And the Squire!—Mr. Blunt's slightly rubicund nose twitched; he smelt a rat somewhere there. No man, let him be blind as a bat, or green as a gooseberry—and the Squire was neither the one nor the other—could be long without taking the measure of Veriker. He'd find out in what sort of company Robin and her father had found this Mr. Dorian-Chandos, and how it was they came to be so thick together, they and he. You were never the worse positioned for having a thumb to place down on a man in any case of emergency. Mr. Chandos was all very

well in his way; he could make himself very agreeable, and he was the Squire; but there the matter ended.

Since that first day of introduction, so far as Mr. Blunt was concerned, he had never managed to push the intimacy further. Not that that surprised him very much, nor annoyed him either; he had sense enough to know that they were men whom age and bringing-up in two totally opposite worlds prevented having much in common together. But what did irritate him was, Mr. Dorian-Chandos's manifest avoidance of Christopher: an indescribable something—which, without being in any way able to account for—obliged him to see that the two were never perfectly at ease with one another. It was true Mr. Chandos called frequently, often under the pretext of a very flimsy necessity; but any step beyond mere civility

was almost resented in his manner, and every offer of hospitality was unhesitatingly declined.

Gradually and very unwillingly it began to dawn upon Mr. Blunt's mind that Robin was the object of all this attention, not only on the part of Mr. Chandos, but of everyone else in and about Wadpole ; and that so long as they could secure Robin's society, Christopher and he might go whistle.

There were moments when these thoughts filled Mr. Blunt with such fury that to guard himself against them he had to seek some distraction. This then was what he had toiled for, made his money for—why he had bought an estate and surrounded himself with luxury, that the daughter of that swindler might have the benefit of it—that she might go driving about the county belaced and befurbelowed, hand and glove with the best ;

not for the reason of being *his* son's wife, but because, forsooth, she was the daughter of *Mr. Aston Veriker!* Mr. Blunt's veins stood out, his pulses beat, his heart thudded until he grew nervous at the force of his own passion; and to calm it he would have recourse to a remedy, any over-indulgence in which, while it made him more at ease in himself, rendered him twenty times more obnoxious to those around him.

He would waylay Christopher; contradict, thwart, argue with Robin, and grow furious because in each dispute the husband would side with the wife. Every now and then he would make a fresh attempt at stirring Christopher up to what he seemed blind to. Why did he permit Robin to go alone out riding and driving, to these parties, to luncheons, and afternoon teas? hadn't they asked him?

'Certainly he had been asked,' Christopher would say.

'Then why don't you go? You've learnt to drive and to ride—you know how to play all these games; what do you stop at home for?'

'Because I prefer to stop at home.'

'Oh, prefer! Ah yes, that's it. Well then, I can tell you what: if you stop at home she ought to stop too.'

'Not at all, if it pleases her to go.'

'Pleases her to go! A wife's business is to be pleased to do what her husband does, and not to be seen all over the place with this one and the other, and you don't know who.'

'I am perfectly satisfied; I always know with whom Robin has been.'

Alas, poor Christopher! he only knew it too well. Jealousy is love's shadow, and he

had not been many times in presence of Jack with Robin without knowing on whom that shadow had fallen.

Christopher held an index to most of Jack's movements. He could have told where they would meet him, why he would not stay, where he would not go. In a room he began to count how long it would be before Jack would find himself at Robin's side, and he had blushed at the anxiety with which he had sought in the dictionary for some sentence in Italian which Jack had spoken to her.

Then the sight of her face, radiant and happy, sent a chill through Christopher's heart. It was the Robin he had seen in Venice—until the last month she had never looked like that since they were married.

The bursts of song which every now and then came from her as from a bird, jarred

on the ears that had known her dumb until this presence came to make that melody.

Oh, cruel, cruel Love! what tortures lie within thy quiver! Strive as he would, Christopher could not help holding Jack as the mirror by which he saw reflected all Robin's actions. When he stayed at home —not wishing to give his weakness food by watching them—Robin, as soon as they were alone—for a sort of dumb resentment had sprung up between her and Mr. Blunt, which kept her silent before him—would talk of all that had happened; tell him of what this one had said—had done; of herself; of Jack. So far, nothing was hidden—of that Christopher felt sure, and his surmise was correct; Robin lived a joyous being, with no thought as yet that the atmosphere which had turned all to brightness was the atmosphere of love.

Happiness in many cases serves as the hole into which the ostrich puts its head.

Robin never stopped to consider what people said, what they thought, what remarks they might make upon her—she had never been trained in the wholesome fear of Mrs. Grundy; and Jack, having yielded to temptation, was now growing reckless, leaning all his might on that treacherous reed which he called honour, and stultifying himself by the oft-repeated assurance that they were nothing more than the friends they had been formerly.

How dangerous for most, so placed, is that constant recurrence to days gone by, those roused memories of things that others know not of—a glance exchanged, a sigh echoed, a word interpreted! All these passed between Jack and Robin, and each

time they met, the communion grew more dangerously dear.

Georgy Temple, who now saw a great deal of Robin, had more than once given Jack a word of warning, by repeating to him some remark that she had heard made; but Jack only treated what she said with contempt, betraying at the same time a little vexation with her for telling him. 'If they hadn't us to talk of,' he said, 'they'd find something to say about other people. I only know that it is quite impossible that they should have less occasion. Of course they don't know how intimately we've been connected, and as I don't consider it's any business of theirs, I shall not enlighten them.'

Georgy felt it impossible to say more, but she nevertheless remained watchful, and when certain gossips were present made very open demands on Jack's attention.

One afternoon after a little display of this sort, as she and Mr. Cameron were walking back from a tennis-party together, some conversation between them led to his naïvely confessing, what an unaccountable feeling of distress this seeing her cousin's attentions gave him.

'I have no experience of ever having had anything quite like the same feeling before,' he said candidly.

'Is it because you dislike Jack?' asked Georgy.

'No.'

Mr. Cameron was afraid not. He stammered out something about a too idle life having demoralised him, so that since he had come to Wadpole he was grown selfish.

'Selfish are you? in what way?'

Mr. Cameron hesitated, looked at Georgy,

looked away from her, and then with a half-penitent air he said :

'Well, for one thing because I always want to monopolise you, which certainly I have no right to do ; but,' he went on earnestly, 'I assure you that of late, if I see anyone else near you, more particularly Mr. Chandos, I am so angry and miserable that I feel I ought to be ashamed of myself.'

'Ought to be ! then are you not ?'

'No, not in the least : it's with you that I feel so furious, and—the other one, whoever it may be.'

Georgy laughed, amusedly.

'It's a funny state of affairs, isn't it ?' he continued ; 'can you account for it in any way ?'

'I !' and she opened her eyes in amazement ; 'no. How should I ? what makes you ask me ?'

'Oh, because I thought perhaps you might know—people say women think about love a great deal more than men do.'

'Love! what has love got to do with it?'

'That's just what I want to know; because I feel that if I have fallen in love with you, Georgy, it's very foolish in me, isn't it?'

'Very foolish indeed,' she said seriously.

'You think so?'

'I feel sure of it.'

'Ah, yes. I was afraid you would.'

'I haven't the slightest doubt,' she went on in the same voice; 'and I certainly ought to know, since I suffer from the same complaint.'

The pained look in his face had put an end to the teasing she had meant to keep up with him.

'Georgy,' he said reproachfully, looking round; then, meeting her eyes filled with far

more tenderness than half those who knew her gave her credit for, the truth seemed to dawn upon him.

'No, no!' she said, putting up her hands; 'you can't embrace me on the public road. Don't look at me like that.'

'Like what? did I mean to? I don't think I did—I don't know. Georgy, tell me—put it into words—say you really love me.'

'What, before you have told me that you love *me!* I'm sure I shan't.'

'But you know that I love you.'

'No, I don't.'

'But I tell you that I do.'

'Well then, I tell you that I do.'

'Really, truly, positively, love me.'

'Really, truly, positively, love you—there!'

'Oh, you can't, Georgy; it is impossible.'

'Ah, so I have told myself, hundreds of

times,' and she sighed lugubriously; 'but the fact still remains the same. It's horribly foolish in us, you know, two people circumstanced as we are—I without a penny to bless myself, and you with never a shilling to call your own.'

Mr. Cameron laughed delightedly.

'What shall we do?' he said, rubbing his hands together; 'we must make a beginning somehow. Oh, we shall get on bravely after we once see the direction to start in. Let me think, now. The first thing to do is to tell your father. To-morrow morning, before I go to the schools, I shall run up and ask to speak to him.'

'You'll do nothing of the kind,' said Georgy decisively—'not yet,' she added, seeing his look of dismay. 'First of all let me speak to him; and after that, about telling anyone else just yet, we'll see!'

CHAPTER II.

THE antagonism which steadily, day by day, increased between Robin and Mr. Blunt, was not—Christopher was obliged to own—solely the fault of his father.

A change had come to Robin's temper, and she who had been accustomed to make sunshine everywhere, was now irritable, captious, and almost seeking causes for offence.

On two or three occasions Christopher, gently indicating her fault, had tried to remonstrate with her; but instead of more

than meeting him half-way, as up to now she had always done, she resented his interference with sharp words or sullen silence.

Then her moods were so variable, it was impossible to count on them: at times shutting herself in her own room, seeking to be alone—hardly answering if spoken to; at times fatiguing one with a flow of spirits unnaturally high, and painfully reminding Christopher of that mad reckless gaiety which he had so deplored in her father.

What had come to her? What had so changed her?

He who asked that question did not wait for a reply; but a name that he tried to forget rang in his ears, and in spite of himself, pursued him.

'Haven't you anything to talk about, Christopher?' Robin would say, forgetting

that it was she who had always made conversation. Of late, when they found themselves together a restraint seemed to have fallen on them, and neither could think of anything which would interest the other.

The time had gone by when Robin poured out all she had seen and done and said, in a volume of innocent chatter. Now, she went out and came back, saw people at home and abroad, without—beyond the fact that she had done so—Christopher being any the wiser.

'What is the good of telling him,' she would say, 'when he doesn't seem to care?' and all the while a voice within gave the lie to that thought; and struggling with the desire to be frank, and a true embarrassment of finding words to say, she would grow angry with Christopher for not asking questions that would force her confidence.

So far, not a word that might not answer to friendship had ever been exchanged between Jack and Robin; but by degrees, easy and unseen, they had passed from the stage of being open and free to the stage of being watchful and guarded—not watchful of others, they felt far too secure for that to occur to them—but each kept a hold on senses that would not now always answer to control.

Little did Christopher dream that more than once Robin had returned home full of the determination to tell him—she did not know what—except to say that she felt wretched, miserable, and that he must help her; and coming in she had found him seated with his father, reading to him, talking with him, and, as it seemed, hardly noticing her. And the poor heart, bruised with stumbling, tender, and easily set smart-

ing, would grow faint, because the voice of that tempter, who never missed an occasion, told her, 'He does not want you; he gets on very well without you.'

Had he ceased then to care for her—did he no longer love her? Oh, sorrowful tears! that flowed over hopes that were shattered —two lives that were divided!

As a beam in the hand of a giant, misunderstanding comes to widen the breach between those who love. Thus Christopher, equally sore at the neglect he suffered under, winced, because, after having been absent for hours, Robin still stayed away, avoiding his company. Did she think that it was pleasure to sit with his father? striving to cheat the old man out of his ill-humour, so that he might be better dispositioned to show them generosity.

The question of that separate income

—more than ever of late—had seldom been away from Christopher's mind, but each attempt to name it had been met with increasing rebuffs.

'You've all you want, and whatever you wish for you can have; and if that don't satisfy you, I don't see what will.'

'But it's usual, father,' Christopher would urge, 'when a man hasn't a profession, and is married, that he has something independent given to him.'

'Who says it's usual?'

'Oh, I don't know who.'

'No, nor I either. I'll tell you, though, what isn't usual—for a man to give the fling of his house to a parcel of people who are above putting their legs with him under the same table.'

'How do you mean? I don't see what that's got to do with it.'

'No—nor I don't mean that you shall, neither; which you would be mighty likely to do, if that young lady upstairs got the chance of a house of her own to rule the roast over. Ah, I never made a greater mistake in my life than in letting you go off there; I might have known no good would come of it. There now, don't begin! I ain't going to say a word against *her;* only she's got the name of Veriker, and a tame bird can't come out of a wild egg.'

'It's rather late in the day to be thinking of that now,' Christopher would answer gloomily. And the old man would tell him that none knew that better than he did himself; but he wasn't going to make a bad matter worse by letting the reins go from out his hands altogether.

'When it's a child to provide for,' he said,

'you won't find me say nay; but so long as you're only the two together, as things have always been so let them stay.'

And for that time, at least, Christopher would have to give up the discussion; but he by no means abandoned it; his love for Robin made him daily more alive to the necessity of seeing her provided for, so that, happen what might, she would never be left wholly dependent on his father.

Mr. Blunt, seeing his resolve so fixed, was equally firm in the opposite direction; and without any open warfare, Robin became the unacknowledged bone of contention between them. Everything she said irritated her father-in-law; everything she did annoyed him; they could not be left together for five minutes, but an offence had been taken or given—ofttimes of a nature which, while it stung her to the quick, she could not

repeat to Christopher, nor even allude to its meaning, while he, good fellow, only getting a garbled account, would feel but the greater pain at Robin's lack of forbearance.

Thus gradually the house was being sapped of domestic harmony, an undercurrent of discord was set flowing; and with the gladness of a bird who finds again its liberty, did Robin continue to count on the meetings which Jack was always proposing.

People began to exchange meaning looks, and have their own little particular jokes about the great attention paid to Mrs. Christopher Blunt by Mr. Dorian-Chandos. The ill-natured shook their heads over it, the better-disposed did not wonder; Mrs. Blunt was really so charming, sang so well and was so good-natured about it, that they felt certain there never could be any harm in her—

though it would not be surprising if there was when one thought of a sweet young creature like that, belonging to a good old family too, being condemned to pass her life with that silent, stupid young Christopher Blunt and his atrociously vulgar father.

There was one fact that was universally condemned as a pity, and that was that Georgy Temple allowed her designs to be so apparent. She positively forced herself on the Squire, there was no shutting your eyes to that; and two or three times he had, as well as a man could, decidedly rebuffed her.

Mrs. Temple, too, seemed to take the thing for granted; she had spoken to several friends about what an excellent thing it would be for Dora and the whole family. It was such a terrible mistake, because you happened to be related to a man, to suppose you had a

positive right to him ; and in their opinion the Squire wished them to see it, and to show them that Mrs. Blunt was an old friend too—though nobody could forget that while Georgy Temple was there to tell them. She was for ever harping on how very intimate they two had been in bygone days together, as if that would prevent your seeing how jealous she was of them now.

All these different motives, real and supposed, gave quite an impetus to Wadpole society; and the weather being fine, and the days long, parties and picnics followed one on the other. To some of these Christopher went, from some he stayed away ; and when he did so, Robin and the Temples most frequently went together.

* * * * *

'Without my seeing much of him, Jack manages to favour us with a good deal of

his society,' the rector said to Georgy, as, the day following her explanation with Mr. Cameron, she volunteered her company for a walk to Uplands with her father.

The conversation had turned on some of the previous parties, and Georgy was laughingly repeating a few of the remarks she had heard made upon her.

'It fails me to think what mother will say when she finds that Jack and I are not engaged to each other,' she said, altering her voice, and looking at him fixedly.

'And you are not ?'

'No.'

'Not going to be ?'

'Never.'

The word came very decidedly.

'Ah !' and he gave a deep-drawn breath. 'Well then, it being settled that it is not for your sake that he is always to be found

dangling about in women's company, I think the sooner Mr. Jack makes himself for a time scarce in Wadpole, the better.' Sitting quietly by, engrossed in the cleaning of his guns, the arrangement of his flies, the putting in order of his fishing-tackle—for the privacy of a room had been a luxury so long done without, that he had ceased to feel the necessity of it—the rector noted many things which were believed to escape his observation. 'What do you say—eh?'

'Say I wish you'd tell him so, father.'

Georgy felt as if nothing could be easier.

'I tell him! not I, my dear;' then observing the expression on her face, he added in explanation, 'There are some things in which men never interfere one with the other.'

'Not men, perhaps—but you're a clergyman, father; clergymen say many things—'

'About which, if they are anything of my sort, they had better hold their tongues; it doesn't do, my dear, to assume no other duty than that of pulling up all the black sheep you may meet straying.'

Georgy looked troubled; it gave her inexpressible pain to hear her father speak in that way; she always felt that if something —she could not tell what—could have been altered, what a different man he might have been!

'We'll ask Cameron,' he said, patting her arm quietly; 'he'll find something to say to him, I dare say, if you think that's what is needed.'

'You think well of Cameron, father—you like him, don't you?'

'Oh yes,' and the rector made a show of

swallowing something; 'I'm doing my best. Seeing I am likely to get him given to me as a son-in-law, I suppose it's right to try and make the effort.'

Georgy's face turned crimson for a moment; she was completely worsted by confusion.

'W—what do you mean?' she stammered; and then she burst out with, 'That mean, deceitful little wretch! I do believe after all he has been saying something to you; has he? has he said anything to you about me?'

The rector shook his head.

'No,' he said; 'but he has been saying something *to* you, I see.'

'Oh well, really, papa, I believe I first put it into his head.'

'Your sex generally do, my dear.'

'No; but I mean I thought of it first.'

'I am even prepared to credit that too.'

'No, but joking apart, he couldn't believe it was possible. I saw that.'

'And you helped him to a solution of his difficulty.'

'Well, you know, when two people are of one mind, it makes things easier, doesn't it?'

'If they happen to be of one household, certainly it does.'

'Oh, that makes me think of mother. How shall we tell her? what will she say?'

'Say it's my fault, that's certain, for wanting a curate to help me.'

'So she will; I never thought of that.'

'Nor of a good many other things, I dare say. Did it happen to occur to either of you how you were going to live?'

'It occurred to me very forcibly,' said Georgy dolefully. 'All the same, papa,' and

the bright fearless eyes looked at him steadily, 'I have made my choice, so you must forgive me.'

'Forgive you, child!' and laying his hands on her shoulders, he wheeled her round, and for a moment stood silently regarding her. 'And so you thought I had not seen anything of what was going on,' he said presently, 'that you were bamboozling your stupid old mole of a father, did you?'

'Oh, it wasn't that I meant to keep it secret from *you*—only—well—oh, I can't explain it quite, you know.'

'Can't you?' he said; and then, with an odd quaver in his voice, he added: 'I suppose it never entered into your young head that once upon a time—long, long ago—I was in love too. Yes, Georgy, the same voice you hear spoke to me; to one—not so very unlike you—I then told the same

old story. They are all green memories still within me, and the recollection of them makes me tender to you.'

Georgy slid her arm though his—she took his hand into her own—and silently they walked on together without another word or question, for something seemed to tell the girl that it was not of her mother that her father was speaking.

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE startling all Wadpole with the news of her engagement, Georgy Temple's desire was to get Jack out of the way. 'I shall speak to him plainly,' she said, talking the matter over with herself, 'tell him that I don't consider that he is acting fairly about Mrs. Blunt, and ask him what he really intends to do?' and managing to secure Jack's company to herself that evening, she adroitly led up to the subject, so that finally she was able to put these questions to him.

As she foresaw, Jack was more than ever furious; but the temper he showed was not the temper she feared. He gave vent to too many invectives against fate, himself, and those by whom he was surrounded, to make his anger very dangerous.

In truth, much that Georgy said were but echoes of thoughts, the conflict of which had of late by turns threatened to save Jack and to sink him.

Walking in this Paradise of content, Robin as yet had but barely caught sight of the tree on which hung the apple of temptation; but for Jack its fruit had been plucked too often for his eyes not to be fully open to the danger he was running.

Each time he left Robin he made a resolve that the next should be the last time of meeting, and the tedium of separation

was often beguiled by the plans he was busy in projecting.

He would go; he didn't care where, nor what became of him. Life, as far as he was concerned, was not worth considering. It was for her and on her account alone he made the sacrifice, and who could tell what it cost him! Would she guess? would she ever dream of the suffering he had undergone to leave her fair name untarnished?

The tempter's best moment is chosen when—the battle with self over, the victory, as we think, won—we sink down weary and spiritless; then, unnoticed, an insidious allurement creeps in where a bold assault would have been resisted.

It was thus that into Jack's mind came the desire for a farewell meeting to gain an opportunity of giving Robin some

slight inkling of why he was going away. Surely the small indulgence of seeing her alone for the last time might be permitted him. Stern censor as he now held himself to be, that need not be denied; to say 'no' was flinging a doubt on his resolution.

But to accomplish this meeting—there lay the difficulty—how was it to be managed? Never since that first time in the thicket had the two been positively alone together. If they were walking, somebody else was walking at their heels; if riding, a third always bore them company; and in rooms—Robin singled out by the men, Jack a little run after by the women—it was only by a whispered word, a meaning look, the pressure of a hand, they conveyed to each other their mutual sympathy. Certainly opportunities had occurred when together

they might have strayed away, but it was the most certain proof of Jack's sense of danger that he had invariably avoided such conditions, ofttimes to Robin's surprise and unacknowledged disappointment. She was therefore a trifle startled when, some few days after his conversation with Georgy—managing during an afternoon at the rectory to get near her—he said, lowering his voice so that it should not reach the ears of those near them:

'Do you never go to the thicket now, in the morning?'

She shook her head.

'I have never been there since that day,' and the eyes momentarily raised to his were drooped again.

For a minute neither spoke; Jack was arranging in his mind the desired meeting Robin's heart was beating so fast that it

frightened her. Only that morning, some trifle that had occurred had seemed suddenly and for the first time to ask, Whither was all this leading? And Robin, flinging herself down by the side of the bed, near which she stood, had given way to an uncontrollable fit of weeping, the cause of which she did not seek to define; but her manner at breakfast that morning was softened almost to penitence to Christopher, and Mr. Blunt's surly fault-finding was allowed to pass unnoticed.

There is a compunction which does not shape itself in words, because, perhaps, the sins which have caused it have dwelt but in thought and feeling.

Without asking herself the cause, Robin had come to the resolve that she would stay at home more, not leave Christopher so much as of late she had been doing; and

she had even reached the length of saying to him that she fancied he was not looking well—what did he think of a little change of air ?

Clutching at the thought, the only way to hide his joy was to assume indifference.

Oh, he didn't know — he didn't care. Well, yes;—perhaps, if it pleased her—some day.

Pleased her ? Robin swallowed down the sigh, and quickly changed the subject; even to herself, she refused to own how much that proposition had cost her.

All that day her emotions continued high-pitched, her nerves over-strung. She would not have kept her engagement, only that it was to the rectory, an afternoon-party, and Mr. Blunt was going as well as Christopher.

Jack had had the forethought to count on this party. On any occasion of festivity at the rectory, every domestic arrangement was in the most inextricable state of muddle. No one in the house had any head but Georgy; and she was here, there, and everywhere, with such unflagging energy, that Mrs. Temple usually felt it incumbent on her to apologise for her daughter. It had become such a want, she said, in the present day, repose of manner.

Mr. Blunt, to whom she happened to say this, too much on his good-behaviour to contradict her, said:

'It was a pity, though, that it should be.' But feeling, hot and thirsty as he was, that he could better put up with want of repose than with the want of a good cup of tea, which Georgy was hastening to bring him,

he addressed Mrs. Temple, in his heart, as a stiff-necked canting old Jezebel, who wasn't worth being named on the same day as her straightforward good-looking daughter. 'And she's a lady, too,' he added, following up his meditation, 'every inch of her, no matter what she's up to, or what she has on; and I only wish I had got her for a daughter-in-law. You'd have to keep the whole bunch o' them in the bargain, but better so than that one;' and his eyes fell scowlingly on Robin, standing a little apart with Jack near her, while Georgy engrossed the attention of Mr. Cameron and Christopher.

The familiar contact into which the three were brought had obliged the curate to divulge his secret to his friend—for such Christopher had become—and then, growing uneasy at having told him, he felt compelled

to confess what he had done to Georgy, and then to run away, so that, without him, they might make it all right together. Of course he had to be brought back to be duly admonished and interceded for; and then Georgy, giving it as her opinion that the various refreshments had got into his head, remained very much on the alert with him to make sure that he committed no further indiscretions. This, added to her other duties, withdrew much of her attention from Jack, who, as he had foreseen, found more than usual opportunities for speaking to Robin.

He had quite decided upon leaving Wadpole; and this meeting he wanted to arrange in the thicket was to be a farewell interview, where, safe from observation and interruption, he might tell her that he was going away, and let her perhaps guess at

the cause. Why not? It could not harm her to know that he cared for her—had always cared for her—his love fed by the thought that she had in return given her heart to him.

Of late Jack's assurance had terribly failed him, and he began to think it possible that, after all, Robin perhaps had never counted him as anything but a friend; and the memories that rose up in contradiction had goaded him on to make a final trial, so that at least he might carry with him some crumb of consolation, no matter how small it might be.

Between people coming and going and chattering with them as they passed by, there was only the opportunity of an occasional sentence, which Jack seized on each time.

'The trees are all out now—it is lovely in the thicket,' he said.

'Yes, is it?'

Something in his manner troubled her, gave a sense of consciousness which filled her with embarrassment. Why should not the place look lovely? Why should he not tell her so? Robin made an effort to speak unconcernedly.

'I must try and go down there some day, soon.'

Another interruption, so that ten minutes had gone before Jack asked,

'When will you go? To-morrow afternoon? about three o'clock will you be there?'

He spoke eagerly. Robin's heart beat faster than before.

'Robin! promise me, for the sake of old days, that you'll come. You will, won't you?'

Oh that voice pleading close to her ear

—for Jack had bent his head lower—what memories it brought back! Side by side they were standing on the shores of Lido. They were gazing at the stars, listening to the sea, basking in the sun together—then always together. Now!

Jack hardly realised that their eyes had met, before Robin was half-way across the lawn to join a group seated there; and after that, finding he had followed her, she volunteered her services to Georgy, asking if she could be of any use to her; moving about from this place to that, but always avoiding Jack, who, strive as he did, found no opportunity of saying another word to her.

CHAPTER IV.

THAT afternoon it had been arranged between Christopher and Mr. Cameron that they would spend the next day at Uplands, and soon after breakfast Christopher started to call for his friend. The confidence of the previous day seemed but to draw the two men closer together, and without well knowing how it had been led up to, Christopher found that he was talking of himself, and, a very unusual thing with him, of his own affairs.

He wanted some advice respecting this

income he was asking from his father, and to show reason why a separate allowance was imperative, entailed a relation of some of their domestic difficulties to Mr. Cameron.

Mr. Blunt's ungovernable temper, and its growing violence towards Robin, were sufficient causes to give for the estrangement which of late had separated them; and Christopher felt half the weight vanish as Mr. Cameron severely blamed him for not at once speaking candidly and openly to Robin. The subject once broached, they slid on by degrees to talk of Venice, and of the life they had lived there; and these memories once reached, even after the two had separated, Christopher's thoughts were still busy, and he returned home with a lighter spirit and full of courage to speak.

He blamed himself because the night before, when Robin had followed him into

the library, as if wanting to talk, he had not encouraged her to stay; but that question of independent means was so before him, more particularly since Robin had suggested that some change might do them good, that Christopher had determined to state his request more forcibly in a letter which he had written that night, and left for his father to peruse while he was away.

Voices!

Christopher had come round by the garden, and was close by the veranda out on to which opened the room where, after luncheon, Robin usually sat. He listened; it was Robin's voice—high-pitched, loud, angry, and mixed with it came a volley of coarse abuse and vituperation, which made him fling open the door. There, purple with rage, sat his father; and before him, erect,

defiant stood Robin, her colour red, her eyes blazing.

His coming into the room seemed to attract no attention, so engrossed were they one with another.

'Father! Robin!'

Christopher tried to put himself between them; but Robin's strong young arm pushed him away.

'You had better not come here,' she said. 'He is your father! and you say you owe him some duty. He is not mine!' and she threw into the words an accent of withering contempt, 'and I owe him none.'

'You owe me, though, the victuals you eat, and every single stitch of clothes you've got on your back.' By way of parenthesis, Mr. Blunt, when angry, borrowed his speech from a not particularly choice vocabulary. 'If it wasn't for me, you'd be a pauper—

a beggar living on your wits, as your father did before you! Oh, a nice trap the two of you laid, and I, like a fool, swallowed the bait; and now it's a separate house, a separate income—nothing less will content you.'

'Father!' exclaimed Christopher.

But the old man shook him off roughly.

'Don't try to stop me,' he said; 'it's high time she heard some of the things I've been telling her; if she didn't know them before she knows them now. Oh, she's a true daughter of her precious father! Vagabond swindler, I only wish he'd been hanged before he'd written his palavering letter to me!'

Goaded beyond endurance, Robin sprang forward to answer, but Christopher had already caught her by the shoulder.

'It is of no use trying to resist, Robin,'

he said sternly; 'out of this room you must go. It is for me to speak to my father, not you. Try and remember that he is an old man, that his passion has mastered him—anything you like, but stay to contend with him you shall not.'

And after another moment of useless struggle, the key was turned in the door, outside which Robin found herself standing motionless, speechless, staring blankly as if stunned. Just then the clock struck one—two—three—three o'clock! A half-smothered cry burst from her lips, and past the window like one possessed she ran out of the house.

Need it be said whither she was flying? There was but one being who would sympathise with her sorrow, to whom she could tell her trouble; he was waiting for her, and to him she was going.

'Jack!'

As in the days of old, when she had sobbed out her childish griefs upon his neck, at sight of him her arms opened, only he stayed her by the quick catching of her hands in both of his—a glance had shown him that memory alone prompted this self-abandonment of action.

'Robin, what is it? what is the matter? what has happened to you?'

She had slid down before him, was kneeling on the grass, her head bowed on his hands, her eyes raining tears on them.

It was in vain he tried to raise her.

'Let me be!' she sobbed; 'let me stay!'

A rush of tenderness drew Jack to bend down, his lips would press themselves upon that silky head, but ere they touched it he drew back. No—he was too near the verge to venture anything which would at once

against me—the vile lies he has dared to speak against my father! He calls him a card-sharper and swindler, and says he laid a trap to catch Christopher to get him to marry me—that I owe him the food I eat—the clothes I wear—that but for him I should be a beggar.'

Between his teeth Jack bestowed on Mr. Blunt some ugly epithets.

'Oh, the cursed fate,' he groaned, 'that has pursued us both! What made you in such haste, Robin? you might have written, you might have trusted me. When I left you—went away, I could have sworn that you loved me.'

'When you went away,' she repeated dreamily.

'Yes, from Venice, the last time we parted there; only that I was not worth a sou, do you think I could have left you?

carry him over; a quick-caught breath sent the impulse back, and with a face turned pale, his nostrils quivering, his mouth tight-set, he waited for Robin to recover.

The burst of tears loosened the hold of suffering, there was no longer that grip upon her throat; gradually words to say came to her mind, and though her voice was broken and tremulous, she had a better command over her emotions.

'Jack,' she said, looking at him fixedly—there was no feeling now that she must avert her eyes from his face—'Jack, I'm going away—going to leave here for ever. No, don't look like that—don't tell me I ought to stay. I can't—I can't! that horrible old man will drive me to kill him if I do. Oh, if you could but know all I've suffered from him since I came—the things he has said to me—the accusations he has brought

against me—the vile lies he has dared to speak against my father! He calls him a card-sharper and swindler, and says he laid a trap to catch Christopher to get him to marry me—that I owe him the food I eat—the clothes I wear—that but for him I should be a beggar.'

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'When you went away,' she repeated dreamily.

'Yes, from Venice, the last time we parted there; only that I was not worth a sou, do you think I could have left you?

Were words needed, Robin, to tell you that I loved you ?'

Oh, the wealth of tenderness which Jack threw into that most unmerited reproach ! At one sweep the clouds rolled back, and left the past without a shadow.

'You—you did care for me, then ?'

Rosy as the dawn the blushing colour came creeping into Robin's face.

'Like *that* when we were in Venice together ? Oh !'

Words are not given to tell the joy she felt.

'I worshipped you,' he said—'worshipped you then as I do now.'

* * * * *

'Hush !'

That mad beating of their hearts had almost dulled their ears to sound.

'I heard a noise, I thought ; did you ?'

There was no danger now of being seen; the trees of leafy June, grown thick and close, shut the whole space from out of view.

For a few moments the two stood listening attentively; all was still—not a sound could they hear. Consciousness had however returned, and with it a sense of danger.

Fixing his eyes on Robin, Jack stood silently looking at her; she, with no thought of the future, was listening to a wondrous melody, 'He loves me—he loves me!'

Ah, how many a woman has gone down in the whirlpool of destruction, with that siren song sounding in her ears.

'You say that you must go away,' Jack began, hurrying out his words. 'How is that possible without friends, alone, without money—by yourself?'

'I thought that you would help me—would lend me some money, I know.'

When she had talked of going away her heart had been hot and angry; but Jack loved her—had always loved her. Holding that talisman, what could harm her now?

So opposed is the nature of man and of woman. The words which had soothed Robin had been to Jack as burning pitch upon smouldering tow. Carry out his good resolves, do what he had vowed to do? Impossible—impossible!

'Lend you money!' he repeated contemptuously; 'is not every penny I possess at your service, to make what use you like of. Of what value is anything to me so long as I have not you to share it?'

Robin took a step back.

'But——' she said.

'But—but, Robin, we have gone too far

for "buts." An hour ago I had made the resolution to say good-bye to you—to go away—to leave you; now,' and his voice trembled, 'I shall still go, only you will go with me—you must—you shall!'

She did not speak, but something in her face made him say more pleadingly:

'Would you spoil both our lives? Make mine a burden and a curse to me, because an unforeseen chance drove you into a bondage the gall of which is killing you? Child, think! if I had loved you less I should never have left you. It was the greatest act of self-sacrifice in all my life, and to lose you has been my reward. Must I plead with you, tell you the misery I have endured, the torture I have suffered? No! Come with me, and life will be paradise. Send me away, and I am lost.'

'No, no, Jack, don't say so;' and she

pressed her hands against her eyes to drive back the image that word had conjured up. 'I will go with you anywhere, only it must be soon—at once.'

'To-night?' he said eagerly.

'To-night.'

'You will come?'

'I promise you I will.'

Jack carried first one hand and then the other to his lips; a little shrinking back on Robin's part warned him not to risk more; besides which, he himself felt the great need of present restraint: the time would soon come—was very near.

They would meet in the same place at a later hour, by which time all preparations would be made to insure their uninterrupted departure.

Had a chill fallen on them both, making them look so grave, and holding their speech

in check, so that beyond the necessary interchange about time and place, neither seemed to find anything to say? It was an unacknowledged relief when the fear of observation suggested the necessity of separation, and Jack, now full of prudence, decided that Robin had best return to the house, while he waited there until he felt sure she was well on her way.

The branches which he had held back to let her pass through closed again. He had watched the last glimpse of her departing figure, and now turned to where a cut-down root of a tree stood, against which he leaned, trying to calm down the fierce turmoil of passion, which in one burst had carried away all his late resolutions.

Only that morning, in an interview which he had sought with Georgy Temple, he had told her of the decision he had come

to; and made stronger by her out-spoken approval, he had confessed the error he had made in returning so soon to Wadpole. They had discussed where he should go, and what he should do, and Georgy had promised that during his absence, she would keep him posted up in all the news of the neighbourhood.

What would she think now when she learned that Robin had gone with him? He could not tell her that a mere chance, an unforeseen accident, had brought about an event which she would always believe must have been decided on at the very time they were conversing. Georgy's was not a disposition to overlook a deception; he would, he felt, forfeit her friendship for ever. The rector, too, what would he think of it, and other friends he had made in the county among his neighbours? All would blame,

all condemn him; and rightly too, because none knew the real facts of the story. If they did, whatever they might say, they would feel differently.

How strangely inconsistent is human nature! Never before had Jack seemed to value the good opinion of others so highly. Not for worlds would he have acknowledged to himself that he regretted the step he had taken, but a thousand pricks of conscience came to torment him.

A few words—two or three disjointed sentences dropped by Robin—had given him the key to all he had made her sensitive heart suffer; and the thought of that newly-awakened love—shrinking back with shame because of the fear that it had given itself to one by whom it was not wanted—stirred him with a compunction he had never felt before. It was true he had played

with her, trifled with her, thinking of his own pleasure, not of her pain.

Was this what he was still doing?

His answer came in the vows he registered to protect her, shield her, devote his whole life in striving to make her happy.

Could he do this?

Suddenly the instinct that some one was near, rather than any sound he heard, made him look up and turn half round.

It was Christopher standing close to him.

'Have you been here long?' Jack asked.

And supreme as seemed the moment, terrible as was the situation, Christopher could but marvel at the self-command showed in putting the question—no start, no change of countenance betrayed any emotion.

'For some time, behind the brushwood there, I have.'

No need to tell that; Jack had but asked to gain time. He saw in Christopher's face that he had been witness to what had passed between him and Robin, and the knowledge made him feel much less at ease than he seemed. Drawing himself up, he stood and with a questioning look waited for Christopher to begin.

How contrary to anything we may conceive are the tragedies in real life usually played out! Accusation, invective, reproach sound natural enough on the stage; but standing face to face—the injured and the injurer—the froth of many words is out of place. So at least it seemed to Christopher. What he had to say needed no prelude to discover his outraged feeling. Indignation, wrath, suffering, what mattered it to the man who had planned to rob him of the one treasure dearer than life? Christopher had

left her? She did not know that I was coming back. I did not realise myself then how I cared for her. I had known her so long as a child—a pet, a plaything—that the thought of anything more had hardly presented itself until, in telling me of his illness, her father spoke of her being left in the world alone and friendless.'

'Was it you, then, who suggested that he should write to us?'

Jack gave an assenting movement.

'It seemed horrible,' he said, as if in excuse, 'to picture a girl like Robin without any natural protector. There was enough to shield her from while her father lived. He gone—what might have befallen her?'

'Hardly worse than threatens to befall her now,' said Christopher sternly.

For a moment Jack stood silent.

'Your wife is perfectly innocent,' he

began; 'and, as far as that goes, this meeting which I asked of her was but to bid her farewell. I could not stay here and be silent any longer, and I was going away. My plans were settled, and all arrangements made. If your father's brutality had not driven her into my arms, we should be parted now—I should have left her. I could have gone then, with my secret safe in my own keeping.' Christopher groaned audibly. 'But now,' continued Jack, his voice grown husky, his face working and troubled, 'after seeing her on her knees before me, imploring help for our old friendship's sake, begging me to aid her in escaping from the insults and tyranny which are daily, hourly heaped upon her—never! Whom has she to turn to if I fail her?'

The eyes that met his gave the answer.

'You are, I know, her husband; but——'

'I am, unfortunately,' said Christopher, 'for her and for me too; but, believe me, I would never have been so had a word been dropped of you. It was what I begged her father to tell me, was there any obstacle he knew of against our marriage? and he said, "No."'

In the anguish of his soul the words Christopher spoke came bitterly.

'What motive had he to deceive me so cruelly? When I——'

'He didn't know he was deceiving you,' interrupted Jack chivalrously; 'he but suspected that Robin cared for me, and he had no faith in my love for her.'

'But you did—you do love her?'

Jack looked at him with surprise, but made no answer.

'It is my one hope,' Christopher continued; 'if you love her, you will spare

her. I told you I had heard almost all that had passed between you, and I know that she is in your power, and I am at your mercy.'

Jack looked away; Christopher's face troubled him.

'Your father makes her life a very hell,' he said.

'I promise that they shall not remain another day under the same roof together. Ask anything you will of me, and I swear to carry it out to the very letter.'

Jack looked at him fixedly; his eyes were strained to search him through and through.

'And if so,' he began, 'after what you——. Could I trust you to be the same to her?'

A flush deepened on Christopher's face.

'In anything which concerns her,' he said

sadly, 'you may trust me entirely. My misfortune is to love her; my crowning misery,' he added bitterly, 'that she does not love me. Did I know of any sacrifice by which I could ensure her happiness, I should not hesitate to make it; but short of taking my own life, I cannot set her free. If I could, I would not come between you.'

Was he speaking the truth? Jack felt an inward conviction of his sincerity forced upon him. In spite of the efforts he had made, he had never succeeded in thinking meanly of Christopher.

'You must give me until to-morrow,' he said, and the struggle he was making showed itself in his face, and the hoarse broken tones of his voice. 'Will you keep silent about this meeting to her?'

'If you desire it. From me she shall never hear that I have spoken to you.'

'A letter sent to your house would be delivered to you unseen ?'

'I will take care it is given into no other hand than my own.'

'And a letter to her ?'

'Shall be faithfully delivered.'

There was a moment of hesitation; Jack looked as if he was going to speak again, then of a sudden he wheeled round, and to Christopher's surprise, he was gone. The crackling of bough and branch told the hasty retreat he was making; then all was still, and Christopher was left standing alone.

Like the rush of many waters, desolation overwhelmed him. No one was near—not an eye could see him; and casting himself on the ground, he lay still and motionless.

CHAPTER V.

THOSE who, with eyes open, stand lingering on the edge of a precipice, are often surprised at the slight touch which sends them over. Some unexpected drift—some passing gust for a moment draws them nearer, and, already dizzy, they lose their footing before they realise their danger.

Such a whirlwind had overtaken Jack and Robin, urging them to a step which, even before parting, they began to repent of making. Alas! how few of us dare

measure strength with Temptation! Secure, as we may think, at every point, there is yet some vulnerable spot by which we may be taken.

Robin, hurrying through the thicket, over the now dried-up brook, and back by the way she had been first led in coming, felt as if flying from something she could not escape. Certain words went sounding in her ears, repeating themselves in her mind, while their meaning eluded her:

'Go away—away with Jack—away from Christopher.'

She rang the changes on these three sentences without feeling much affected by either. The numbness which follows on great emotional strain had overtaken her; and everything she did, she did mechanically.

In the house, coming out from the dining-room, she met the butler.

'Mr. Blunt's ordered his dinner in his own room, ma'am,' said the man, with a perfect knowledge of the family fracas. 'I don't know if Mr. Christopher's in or not; I saw him in the garden, but that was some time ago.'

Robin continued on her way upstairs to her own room. She did not possess much that of a right she could lay claim to; but there were a few relics, trifles, souvenirs of her father, which, if she could not carry away, she must destroy. An old case in which, at the time of his death, letters were put to be read hereafter. Robin had never found heart to look at it since, but now necessity obliged her, and at haphazard she took out one of the letters and opened it. It was from her mother, written, before their marriage, to her father. She kissed it reverently, put it down, and drew out another. This time

about herself. The mother away, wrote telling the father into what a sweet companion their child—their little Robin—had grown. And then, in all the fulness of maternal love, and with prophetic certainty that her end was drawing near, she entrusted the child to the father's care, trying to foreshadow the woman she would have her grown up into. A sudden gush of tears streamed from Robin's eyes. Underneath, in her father's writing, was written, 'Her last letter, to be kept for Robin to read when she is a woman;' prefixed was the date, just after the death, in the very midst of his great sorrow. Robin turned it over, examining it carefully. Had it ever been read or looked at since? she wondered; and her thoughts went back to the stricken husband laying it aside for his child, and then at a leap she saw the child grown up

— herself. She — Robin—was the little Robin spoken of in that letter. Involuntarily her head bowed down until her cheek lay pressed against the faded, faintly scented paper, the contact with which seemed to bring a sense of soothing to her.

Taking no count of time, Robin did not know how long she had remained resting, when a tapping at the door roused her.

'Yes,' she said; 'who is it?' and while speaking she had gone to the glass to mend the disarray of her dress and get her hair back into order. 'Come in!'

It was Christopher; a glance told him what was going on. There had not been time to put away the case; Robin had left it with the letters on the table.

'I am afraid you thought me rather harsh this afternoon,' he began; and to

afford her time to further recover, he went back and drew the bolt of the door before taking a chair near her. 'I have come to ask your pardon.'

Robin strove to speak, but words would not come.

'It is very terrible,' continued Christopher, 'having to speak so at all to one's father, and to say the things I had to say before you would be too humiliating—too bitter. Happily, Robin, experience has not taught you to feel for me there.'

'Oh! but yes,' she murmured, his voice making her look at his face, drawn, pinched with traces of suffering, the sight of which stabbed her. If a contest with his father so told upon Christopher, how would he live through what he would have now to endure!

'I often think of your father,' he con-

tinued, sighing, 'and how you must compare the two. What a light heart he had! What a gay spirit!'—the tears welled up into Robin's eyes. 'I am glad I knew him—glad I was able to be of some little service to him—that he took a liking to me—trusted me—trusted me with you, Robin, his great treasure!'

He was looking at her now sadly—solemnly.

'We used to have many talks together, he and I. He told me how sorely the thought had pressed on him of having to leave you so young, surrounded by so much temptation. The world looked very different to him then; things he had scoffed at, made light of before, he listened to then with pleasure; he would say, "Tell it to Robin—talk to her about that."'

'About what?' said Robin huskily.

'About our life here—how we have to struggle—make a constant warfare; if we would be united again hereafter—and we hope to be, don't we?—with those we love—your father, mother, and her sister, whose dear name you bear. Long, long before I ever saw you, I used to join in her prayer that God would bless and watch over little Robin Veriker.'

The tears rained down from Robin's eyes, but Christopher, usually so ready to offer comfort, paid no heed to her.

Suddenly his attention seemed attracted to the letter-case.

'Have you been looking over that?' he asked. 'What do you mean to do with the letters—leave them in it, or burn them?'

Robin, guilty as she felt, dare not look up to see if Christopher spoke with meaning. How should he, though? it was not

possible—the question must be put by mere accident only.

'I have not decided yet,' she said. 'I have only read two or three of them.'

'And the reading has upset you? I thought it would, when I laid them aside for you. Do you remember that day? In the evening we started for Spezzia. When, I wonder, shall we ever see Spezzia again, and the little garden—for it was a garden, full of gay blossoms, was it not, when we left him there, lying side by side with your mother?'

Unseen by Robin, Christopher had passed his hand over his brow; the effort he was making was almost too much for him.

'Do you ever wonder, Robin, whether it is possible that those taken from us are permitted to look down on us below? It is a fancy which has a great hold on me. I

should like to think your father and our other dear ones could see us sometimes here together—you and me.'

Robin could no longer keep down the sobs which mastered her control; the hand of an unseen influence seemed laid upon her. Wholly occupied with herself, and what she was about to do, it did not occur to her to ask why Christopher spoke to her thus. She only knew that each word he said awoke an echo in her breast—each stuck a separate thorn into her heart.

A dozen times his name, 'Christopher,' had risen to her lips; but, courage failing, before she had found voice to give it sound, she had snatched it back again. She wanted to tell him that she meant to go away—that she must leave him—could not stay with him any more—that she was going with Jack—that she ought not to

have married him, because, though she did not know it, Jack had loved her all the time —and, though she had not said so, she had always loved him too. Confessions easy to make until she tried to shape them into words ; and Christopher, sitting there silent, rapt in thought, had never before seemed so difficult to approach by her.

The wall of separation which had sprung up between them during the past months was suddenly visible to Robin's eyes, and on the threshold of the confessional she stood afraid to enter in.

'That is the bell,' said Christopher, rising.

What! could he find heart to go down to dinner ?

Robin shook her head.

'No,' she said; 'I could not eat anything if I went.'

Without a remonstrance he turned to go —to go! He—Christopher—wont to beg and implore, was leaving her without a word!

Robin sat aghast. Did he not care? was he not well?

'Christopher,' she said, as he was going out at the door, 'you will come up again?'

'If you wish it; yes, certainly I will.'

And without turning round, he went down, to go through the poor pretence of that mockery of dinner, sat out and partaken of for fear of remarks being made—of what the servants might say; for how was it possible that he could feel certain that Robin might not have been watched?—prying eyes might have dogged her steps with observation.

The thought gave him strength to assume more than his usual air of unconcern. He spoke of some matters going on in the

village to the servant waiting; asked questions and made remarks on the weather; and every now and again his eyes fell on the vacant chair, and it was filled by her once wont to bear him constant company. They were back in Venice eating that first dinner, during which his heart had unbidden strayed from him—made captive by that grace of girlish gaiety. There was a dinner at Florence, he remembered; and one brought about by a chapter of accidents at Sestri Levante, every disaster of which she had turned into fun and laughter.

Oh, how cruel at times is memory! Christopher's heart sickened while recalling that happy past. Unconsciously he pushed back his chair, and then recollection seizing him, he stretched himself back as if only cramped by the way he was sitting.

'There's somebody outside waiting to

speak to you, sir,' said the servant. 'I asked for his message, but he says he was told to see you.'

Christopher was in the hall in a moment. A man standing there advanced, holding in his hand a letter.

'Beg pardon, sir,' he said, 'but I was ordered not to give this to anybody but you; and will you be so good as to send a line in return, to say it reached you safe?'

Christopher took the letter, and went into the morning-room; his hands were trembling, so that he could hardly break the seal. At one glance his eyes drank in the contents, and then his strength seemed to give way; his knees knocked together, so that he had to sit down and make an effort to recover breath. Could it be true? He read the words again.

'As soon I know that this has reached you I shall leave for Monkswell, so as to catch the midnight up-train. Get the enclosed safely delivered. I have said nothing about having seen you.'

Over and over he went through that letter, as if to try and fix it in his mind; and then hastily rising, he wrote back:

'I thank you for what you have done. Your secret is safe in my keeping.'

'Take that!' he said to the man; and he walked with him out of the house, and watched him through the plantation; and then he stood undecided what he should do next. The good tidings that had just reached him ought to lift half the load of care from his breast, instead of which a fresh smart was added to it.

The enclosure Jack had sent was a letter to be given to Robin. Looking at it, Christopher wondered, how was it worded? had he dealt gently, tenderly with her?

'Poor child! poor child!' he murmured. Already the flood of pity had set in—for great love is very strong in compassion.

Towards Jack, Christopher felt all the rising of bitterness; it was the old story of the one ewe lamb desired by him who had all the world to choose from. Up to the present point his thoughts had been centred on how best he should act so as to guard Robin against herself, and take her out of her tempter's power. This necessity no longer existed. Jack gone away, so far Robin was safe. The sigh of discontent told the sting of bitterness. Safe, because her husband, instead of a companion, would be henceforth turned into a spy, a gaoler.

If she would but trust him—tell him all! The thought of Robin believing herself deserted, cast down with shame, humiliated, was only in its measure less painful to Christopher than seeing her stand disgraced before the world.

O pity! generous dole of tender love!

Unable to decide how best to have the letter delivered so that no suspicion of his knowledge should be conveyed, Christopher put it safely into his pocket, and after awhile directed his steps back to the house, and then to Robin's room.

'What a long time you have been gone, Christopher! I thought you did not mean to come back again.'

Robin spoke in that tone of half-querulous reproach never adopted by those we are indifferent to.

'Is it late?' he said, looking at the clock.

'The days are so long now. You would like some tea, wouldn't you?'

'No, not now.'

While he had been absent Robin had been striving to gather up her courage; but the waiting had strained her highly strung nerves and filled her with an irritability she was hardly mistress of.

With an air of weariness Christopher took possession of an easy-chair, leaned back in it, and closed his eyes. How thin his face had gone—how drawn—how ill he looked!

'You don't seem well, Christopher: are you feeling ill?'

What a poisoner of content is suspicion! It was because she was going to leave him, believed that she was going away, that she assumed this anxious tone of inquiry.

'I have not felt very well for some time, he answered coldly.

What should she do? Robin felt a prey to despair. Oh for a kind word, a look to encourage her! Then she could tell him that, she had set herself to say; as it was, it seemed impossible.

Oddly enough, for the time, all thought of Jack seemed driven from her mind, swallowed up in the more immediate necessity of speaking to Christopher. Why did she wish to tell him? She could not say —she did not know. All that she was aware of was an infinite pressure laid on her—a feeling which impelled her to say something by way of reparation. How much, how little—all that was left; only he must not entirely misjudge her. Influenced still by the glamour cast over her by Jack, she could not endure to stab to death the love of Christopher.

And so she moved about the room,

changing her seat, lingering, hovering about him, he all the while perfectly aware of her near presence, although seemingly paying no attention to it. 'It is because of her going away,' he kept repeating; 'she wants to feel she has bidden me good-bye.' Goaded by the thought which more and more pained him, he suddenly got up, feeling he could endure it no longer.

'Christopher, don't go—you mustn't. I—have something to tell you.'

* * * *

A great writer has said that we should not lift the veil from the sanctuary of married life. With sobs, tears, and reiterations such as no pen could give force to, Robin told her tale, and, led on by Christopher, she laid her early love bare before him, hiding nothing, excusing nothing. And the daylight faded away, and dusk became darkness,

obscuring all around; still on the ground, at her husband's feet, Robin sat. It was she who was silent now, he who talked, who pleaded, entreated, urged, until the dew of his speech moistened all that was good in the girl's heart, and rising up she said:

'I will write a letter to Jack and give it to you to send to him; and you must take me away so that I never—never see him again.'

Oh, blessed tears! let them flow, Robin. And Christopher, fold her in your arms, strain her to your heart; for the battle is yours, the victory is won!

That night Christopher locked up the two letters—the one from Robin, the other from Jack—together, unopened. Not a word had he said, not a hint had he given of the knowledge he was in possession of.

Believing that Jack would remain at Wadpole, Robin had made Christopher

promise to take her away by an early train the following morning; and he, desirous that there should be no meeting with his father—from whom, according to his promise to Jack, he intended at once separating her—assented readily. Further arrangements could be made hereafter, but in the same house they must no longer live together.

As the key turned in the desk a sigh escaped from Christopher; he leaned his head on his hands and stayed standing there. Did a vision foreshadow a time to come—perhaps near, perhaps far away—when those letters should be given each to its rightful owner?

CHAPTER VI.

AMONG a small community trifling events make a great stir. The sudden departure of the Squire, followed by the unexpected exodus of Christopher and Robin, furnished Wadpole with a nine days' wonder.

Why had they gone? Where had they gone? Had they gone together? Questions which everybody asked, and nobody could answer.

Old Blunt said his son was a fool. Mrs. Temple did not believe another woman living

had such a daughter. Speculation was rife—opinions varied. And then, the excitement over, the disturbance began to settle down; and very soon, except to the few concerned, the whole matter became stagnant.

'Here we are as we were,' said Georgy Temple to Mr. Cameron.

She had been spending the morning at the school-house, and was walking home by a strangely circuitous route with the curate; in order, so they said, to fully discuss an impending treat got up for the children between them.

'And I, for one, am not sorry,' said Mr. Cameron, with that gratulatory hug of himself together; 'somehow, Georgy, I never felt altogether secure while that cousin Jack of yours was hanging about you for ever.'

'Didn't you?' she said, with a little in-

dulgent laugh at him. 'Oh, you need not have had any fear—there were two insuperable obstacles in the way; but if there had not been, I don't know that Jack and I would ever have given a thought to one another.'

'Two obstacles—insuperable! What were they?'

'Well, on the one part—my part, you know—there was—*you.*'

'Oh!'

'Ah, it is "Oh!" and it was "Oh!" on Jack's part, too; for his obstacle was Mrs. Christopher Blunt.'

'Hush, Georgy! don't speak of it in that way. I don't like to hear you.'

'But the mischief's over now, dear boy. I was very angry with Jack for a time; however, it's come all right. At heart, he's a thoroughly good fellow — oh, you'll see

it when you've got over being jealous of him—and in the end he listened to what I had to say, and made a clean cut and run of it altogether.'

'It was strange his going, and then their going the next day.'

'Yes; I've never made that out—never quite fathomed it. I should like to feel certain why Mrs. Christopher went away.'

'Christopher told me—and I feel sure he would not tell me an untruth—that he had had a great fall out with his father.'

'Well, then, I wish they had done their falling-out the day before; then Jack need not have gone, you know.'

'No?' Mr. Cameron still spoke half-heartedly. 'I wonder if he knows where they are?'

'I don't think so,' said Georgy; 'I don't

see how he should. You had not heard from Christopher when I answered Jack's letter; and, by the way, it would be as well to caution you against telling me anything you fancy they would not like him to know, because I gave him my solemn word to tell him every scrap I heard about them —good, bad, or indifferent.'

'So I told Christopher.'

'Told Christopher! what for?'

'Because I didn't want him to say anything to me that I might not say to you. It might have slipped out unawares,' he added in explanation, 'when we were talking; because I just let my tongue run when I am with you. That's the beauty of it; you can't do that, can you, with any other person?'

Georgy smiled approvingly.

'Now about our engagement,' began Mr. Cameron; 'you know it's high time we

made that known, because I've spoken to your father already.'

'I know you have; but what about mother—have you said anything to her yet?' and she showed two rows of little pearly teeth mockingly.

Mrs. Temple's acts of aggression towards Mr. Cameron were known to everybody. From the first day of his arrival she had commenced hostilities with him—hostilities which he had suffered and borne so meekly, that she was encouraged to step over the threshold of her own domain, and enter into the region of his duties. But at the first onset the curate met her. Thus far and no farther was written on his face; and somehow Mrs. Temple found herself not only repulsed but very much worsted in the encounter. Similar attacks met with similar defeats.

'Mother finds that Tommy Puss has claws,' said Georgy, who hadn't fallen in love then; and honouring the courage of the hitherto shy quiet new-comer, she had combined with her father to protect him; and the cudgels taken up in his defence did not improve Mr. Cameron's position with her mother.

'Well, no,' he said, rubbing his chin, 'I haven't; but I mean to, though. I was wondering when would be the best time to speak.'

'If you ask me, the time I should choose would be whenever we saw some prospect of getting married.'

Mr. Cameron turned a little more round, and looked at her.

'Oh yes, I know,' she said, singing "'When will that be? say the bells of Stepney."'

'Why, my dear girl, a great deal sooner than you think. I'm the most lucky fellow in the world—ah, you may laugh, Georgy, but I am. Well, now, only see! When I was ordained first, I thought I was certain to go to Kensington; it seemed settled there was nothing else for it, when all at once—nobody could tell how—the appointment came for me to go to Wapping! That's only one instance; but I could give you a dozen more. When the fever was raging at Homerton, I didn't see a chance of going there; I wanted above all things to be sent to that hospital—but how? Suddenly dear old Nicolls falls sick; there's a vacancy, and into it they pop me. And then, above all else, there's you, Georgy. Who, in the name of Fate, would ever have supposed I should have a chance with you?—and yet you accept me! Oh, talk of luck, I should

think I was lucky, rather! 'Pon my word, if anything, I'm almost afraid to wish for things—they're so certain to come to me.'

'Then, if you don't begin, from this very instant, to wish as hard and fast as ever you can for a living to be given you, don't expect anything from me.'

'And so I will;' and he joined Georgy in laughing heartily. 'What shall it be? where shall we say? I'll tell you—Bethnal Green, eh? or better still, there's a little iron church in a street close by New Square, in the Minories. I've often had my eye on that; and it mightn't be so difficult to get, either.'

Georgy shook with laughter.

'Upon my word,' she said, 'that's pretty well, a choice between blind beggar's daughters, and old clothes-selling Jews.'

'Well, wouldn't you like it?'

'No, most certainly I shouldn't. I thought you meant some place that was—well, at least respectable.'

'Respectable!'—he gave a shrug of horror. 'Oh no, Georgy, don't let us go in for that. I've had as much as I can stand of respectability here. The other is so much nicer—so much pleasanter: life is a different thing there;' and in his enthusiasm he seemed to sniff its air afar. 'You have work to do from morning till night, and something fresh always turning up.'

'But I don't like the thought of the place any more than of the people.'

'Don't you?' he said disconsolately.

'You forget that I am country born and bred. I should miss the sight of the fields and all the beasts and cattle about dreadfully.'

'H'm! what is to be done, I wonder?'

'Isn't there anything to be done here?' she asked. 'They don't all seem to me so tremendously good, somehow.'

'It isn't that they're by any means good, but they're offended if you tell them so. They would think it presumptuous to feel secure of heaven, but you insult them by the mere suggestion of hell. Hell is a place for those who outrage society—who break the laws—are sent to prison. The outcasts at Uplands are those whom you should speak to about hell, not to Wadpole and its respectable inhabitants—isn't it true, now?'

'Yes, I'm afraid it is; but then Uplands isn't a separate parish, you know.'

'It might be made so at any time. All you want is somebody to rebuild the church, and give something to further endow it—with the consent of the rector, of course—that you know.'

'And where's that somebody to come from, pray?'

'Ah! that's the question;' and he shook his head.

'Very well, then,' said Georgy, by way of teasing him; they had come to the end of the cross-roads, the spot where they intended parting. 'Then *there's* a thing for you to wish for; only bring that to pass, and I'll believe in you.'

'And marry me at once, and work with me? All right; then you'll see.'

'It will be all right when I do see,' she said disbelievingly; and then after a few words of good-bye they turned away from each other—Mr. Cameron to make some sick calls, Georgy to return home and listen to those never-ending jeremiads and jobations, of which she was daily growing more and more weary.

Her mother let her have no peace. Jack's sudden departure served for the continual dripping on the stone. Unless it had been to propose, why, the morning of his departure, had he come up to seek Georgy? and if she had not refused him, what reason was there for his going away? With the view of securing the sympathy of her neighbours, Mrs. Temple, when before them, pointed all her lamentations with certainty; but in presence of her husband and her daughter she felt much less secure. The rector had either no satisfaction to give, or he was determined not to give it her; and as for Georgy, she could get nothing from her but a continual 'No, no.'

It was quite refreshing to meet old Blunt, and together rail out against their two children.

Christopher and Robin had been gone

nearly a month. They had left Sevenoaks, where they had first stopped, and were now at Whitby, hoping that Robin might be benefited by the sea.

'Into which she might fall, for all I should care,' said Mr. Blunt candidly. 'By that marriage, ma'am'—he was imparting this information to Mrs. Temple—'I've lost a son and I haven't gained a daughter. Indeed, to tell the truth, what I have gained would be hard to say. She hadn't got no money; didn't come of, as you may say, anybody in partikler; and there's no sign o' family—no likelihoods of it neither, so far as I can see.' Mrs. Temple agreed there was reason for his dissatisfaction. 'They've taken themselves off from here, and I'm left all alone by myself, high and dry, with nobody to see and nobody to speak to.'

his senses rested entirely on the power he possessed of withholding the necessary supplies of money. Brought up in the certainty that whatever he wanted he could have, Christopher's expenditure had only been limited by his very simple tastes and habits. His father made it a matter of reproach that he wouldn't spend money like a gentleman, and it was with a certain degree of satisfaction, that Mr. Blunt had noticed how greatly since his marriage Christopher's ideas had expanded.

So long as they remained where their neighbours could be dazzled by it, nothing was too costly for them to have, to do, to wear; but away from Wadpole, Mr. Blunt in one place, Christopher and Robin in another, the whole circumstances were changed. Not only did he derive no satisfaction from the money they were spending, but he had the

knowledge that they enjoyed it the more because he had no share in it.

In a letter written on their departure, Christopher had firmly but most considerately told him, how impossible it was that they all should remain living under one roof together. On the score of his health he expressed the wish to leave England for the winter, and he implored his father to allow further arrangements to stand over until they came back; then they would meet and come to some final decision together.

But of late years, Mr. Blunt had not been a man to listen to reason. He who had made his fortune; who, by his own energy, had climbed rung by rung until he found himself standing on the top step of the ladder, be dictated to by his son, put down and set at nought by that Veriker's

daughter—he no longer thought of Robin as his daughter-in-law—never! It was she who had dictated this; she who had put Christopher up to defying his father; and it was she who should be paid out for it.

'I won't take no notice of that,' he said, regarding the letter wrathfully; 'if they choose to chalk out their own way, let 'em take it. I shan't interfere.'

So the letter remained unanswered. Later on, before going to Whitby, Christopher wrote again. No reply came. Only through Mr. Cameron they heard that Mr. Blunt had shut up the house and left for London.

CHAPTER VII.

FROM the time he was ten years old—the epoch of that terrible fever — Christopher Blunt had never enjoyed good health ; but the worry of ways and means, the harass of business, the struggle to get on, had been spared him. Everything he wanted he had, everything he wished for he got. Suddenly a check was put on all this. Although he continued to write to his father, more than once referring to his fast-dwindling resources, there came no answer. What

was to be done? The arrangements by which he was to have secured a separate allowance had never been properly concluded. A small income—under two hundred a year—the rent of some houses, left when a lad to him, was positively all there was to depend on, until the old man relented. He kept this from Robin as long as he could, and then, feeling there was nothing else to be done, he had to tell her of it—to ask her what she would like him to do—to put it to her how she would wish him to act; there was no further doubt his father intended to starve them out.

Few things had Christopher felt more acutely than speaking of this matter to Robin. Since she had left Wadpole, strive as she did, it was plain to see everything was an effort to her. The wish to go out, to sit at home, to keep up a conversation, to seem

interested—all was assumed ; and Christopher, in his sympathy for her suffering, would affect some occupation which would afford her the opportunity to steal away, to sit alone and brood on her misery—for do what she would, Robin was miserable. It is easier, under great emotion, to promise that we will be as we were before, than, the excitement over, to resume that footing. A strain of affectation was put on Christopher as well as on Robin ; neither could afford to be quite natural for fear of what the other might be presuming. And then there was that constant torment about Jack. What did he think ? where had he gone ? what was he doing ? He had never taken any notice of her letter, and strive as reason might to assure her it was better so, a thousand sad repinings said how easily he accepted all she said

without striving so much as to send her an answer.

Robin could put no faith in the hints about Mr. Cameron and his engagement to Georgy. Well posted in all the rumours concerning her and Jack—perhaps now—there together—she gone—why not? Many a heart had been caught on the rebound! And Christopher, watching her, felt himself grow sad; was there to be no happiness for them in life together?

Up to this point there had been the satisfaction that he could give her all she wanted, gratify her every wish. Now this poor comfort was to be taken from him. Unless she consented to return with him to his father, how were they to live? A sickening sense of the future swept over Christopher. Before him arose the insults, disputes, quarrels, and more than all, the

humiliation of being obliged to break his word to Jack.

Stirred by these feelings he set the matter of the whole proceeding before Robin, and then waited her reply.

'And what is it you wish to do?' she asked wearily.

'Wish to do, Robin,' and he looked at her fixedly. 'My wish would be to stay away—to remain here.'

'Then let us stay—it is what I want too.' The words were spoken in the voice of the Robin of old, and seeing he did not answer she added: 'Don't think it is because I am wishing you to defy your father—no; but—' and she hesitated, 'we are so much better here, by ourselves—together, you and I.'

'There is no need to say more. I am only too glad to keep away; my hesitation was entirely about you.' Poor Christopher had

never had to bear the shifts of poverty. 'We shall have so little to live on, you know.'

'But I have lived on nothing at all,' she said gaily, 'positively nothing, often—before we met you.'

'Well then, now you'll have to turn your knowledge to account;' and he laughed, and she joined him—absolutely the first real interchange of sympathy since they had been away.

'We shall have to leave here,' she began.

'Yes, so I was thinking.'

'We had best begin to pack up at once;' and then, the recollection of former flittings coming across her, she added, 'Shall we be able to pay them before we go?'

Christopher's face expressed his astonishment at such an idea.

'Oh, but we've often had to leave with money owing,' she said, 'when we went away.'

'You always contrived to pay them though, later, didn't you?' Christopher spoke this more by the way of talking than asking a question; Robin looked a little shame-faced.

'Not always; I'm afraid we didn't. We couldn't, we hadn't the money to—not to pay everybody; some one would have had to go without, that's certain.'

'But you wouldn't like to do that now, I hope.' Christopher spoke gently. 'You would not like to have what you could not pay for, would you?'

'I didn't like it then,' she said frankly; 'but papa hated poky lodgings, he wouldn't live in them.' Then feeling some further plea was needed, she added, 'There were many excuses to be made for him—poor papa! he

had been brought up so differently; you must not be hard on him, Christopher.'

'Hard, my dear?'

'No, I didn't mean that; I don't think it possible that you could be hard on anybody.'

And somehow their hands had met and were held together, and Robin looking up shyly found Christopher's eyes fixed upon her, and he drew her towards him unresistingly, held her a moment; and then kissed her tenderly; and the ice which had held both hearts seemed melted away.

* * * * *

Happiness often knocks at our door disguised as poverty, and one test of love is to recognise the incognito.

During the six months from midsummer to midwinter, which Robin and Christopher spent in struggling on together, it gave to

him felicity, it brought to her content. Their narrowed means forced them to test their individual resources, and thrown into constant companionship, they grew to entirely depend the one on the other.

How impossible that those of high estate living in great luxury should estimate some of the joys—the blessings which surround the poor.

Indigence at most times means misery; but that estate, in which simple wants have all their needs supplied, makes no demand on pity.

The experience which Robin and Christopher were now going through was laying up a bright store for the future—about which they were less anxious than one would think possible. Christopher still wrote regularly every now and then to his father, although the letters were never an-

swered; but they were received, because they were not returned.

Since shutting up his house, Mr. Blunt had not returned to Wadpole; he was in his old quarters in London, living there surrounded by a good many off-relations, and by boon companions, none of them very desirous of furthering a better understanding with his son. It was shameful, they all declared, such treatment of such a father; and they would chorus forth eulogiums on him, with corresponding strictures on the conduct of Christopher—servility accepted by the old man, but not palatably swallowed. He was tired of the life he was leading—a little ashamed of it in the bargain, and only that he had never given in in his life, he would have written asking Christopher what he wanted. Already he had turned over in his mind divers plans how matters might

be arranged between them. If they would not live with him they might live near him. The mystery was how they were managing to live at all. Benson, his agent, had told him that he had paid the rent of the two houses over; but that, all deducted, for the six months didn't mean much more than a hundred pounds clear.

Since the last time he had heard—about the beginning of November—Mr. Blunt had felt terribly low-spirited and disconsolate; and though he continued to hold Robin responsible, as being the sole cause of this disunion, seeing she was not present and could not hear him, he found no satisfaction in anathematising her. Opposite as they were in habits, disposition, nature, he and his son—difficult as it was, without sympathy of thought, mind, and taste to get on with one another—old Blunt had sufficient per-

ception of good to recognise the merits of Christopher; and the uneasiness he often felt in his presence was due to the fact that in him he saw a being of a superior order.

'He's certain at Christmas to write again,' he said to himself, 'so I'll wait as long as then, and then I'll answer his letter. I'm sick o' this way o' going on altogether. And I'll go down to Wadpole--it'll keep me straight being there, and help to pull me a bit together before I see him again.'

And in prospect of carrying out this decision he sent orders to get the house ready; and by the second week in December he was installed at Priors.

'He looks years older than when he went away,' everybody said when Mr. Blunt passed by; and it was remarked that his hand trembled, his gait was unsteady, feeble; altogether, they decided that he was uncom-

monly shaky, and seemed in rather a bad way.

Ever ready to find fault with somebody, the tide of opinion turned against Christopher. It was held undutiful in an only son to leave his father; and that the old man felt it so, might be seen by the change in him since he had been away. In turn, they laid on Robin her share of blame. Young people should not be so headstrong; and if a girl married a man, and got a good home, it was very hard if she couldn't put up with his father's temper.

Mr. Blunt found that a good many people called, and most of them gave him their sympathy, which at that time he was by no means in want of; and then they forgot all about him, and he was left to himself, solitary and alone, except when Mr. Cameron or Georgy Temple, sometimes

singly, sometimes together, paid him a visit. These two, close friends to Christopher, stuck loyally by him. Mr. Cameron —by reason of his office able to speak plainly—often talked with the old man, and lost nothing of his favour because he spoke the honest truth regarding his son. But at Mr. Blunt's age, backed up by a life's practice, the golden speech of St. Chrysostom would hardly have prevailed against his stubbornness. He wanted to make peace with his son—he wanted to have him back with him—but he could not bring his mind to make the first advances. No, he would wait until the next letter came, and then he would answer it; and in the meantime, as a salve to his conscience, he laid his plans, and searched the neighbourhood over for a house, that he might not only be ready to accede to, but seem to

forestall, the demands they might make of him.

But Christmas went by, and the New Year set in, without any letter coming from Christopher.

CHAPTER VIII.

UNABLE to endure the loneliness of his situation, Mr. Blunt, for the first time, had sent for a few of his friends to bear him company at Priors. The season was a festive one—to gross minds a fitting time for self-indulgence; and thinking it possible such a chance might not come again, they saw no reason why they should not make the most of their opportunity.

It is a curious fact how intolerant domestics are of those taken from their

own rank, and raised to a class above them. Most of Mr. Blunt's servants at one time or other had had experience of families where such after-dinner excesses as they now saw had at least happened, if they were not of frequent occurrence, but—except, perhaps, between themselves—to comment on it had not been thought of by them; now, without hesitation, they made the behaviour of their master and his friends a matter of chit-chat and gossip, until, the reports swelling, all Wadpole was scandalised through the orgies at Priors.

'I shall write to Christopher,' said Mr. Cameron, speaking to Georgy Temple and her father, 'and tell him it is his duty to return home. Don't you think I ought to, sir?' he asked, addressing the rector.

'I think it would be kind in you, Cameron. What do you say, Georgy?'

'I don't see any reason on earth why they should not return. Jack seems lost to us for ever;' and she sighed lugubriously.

Georgy had hoped that, on his return from Norway, Jack would have come back to Wadpole, instead of which he had written to say he was going to India; his mother had begged him to pay her a visit, and as she was getting an old woman now, perhaps if he did not go he might some day regret that he had refused her.

'I don't know why he should regret,' Georgy had said; 'she never took any notice of him before. She wouldn't now if he was not the Squire of Wadpole.'

'All the more credit due to him for not refusing her,' said the rector.

'Oh, that's all very fine; but perhaps we may never see him again.'

'Don't you trouble yourself there. Jack will come back in due time, and bring a wife with him, I shouldn't wonder.'

'I wish he would; that would put a stop to mother.'

'Not a bit of it, my dear. If your mother saw that one worry missed fire, she'd very soon have a pop at us with another.'

'Yes; but it's pretty near time Dora took her turn now, and I was left to settle down with that "miserable, mean, insignificant little Cameron,"' she said, admirably affecting the manner of her mother.

'Come, come, Georgy! don't bear malice.'

'Oh, I don't bear malice; but I don't like it either, particularly when he has so few to stand up for him. I don't think he has a friend left here except you, father.'

'Christopher Blunt will be coming back soon, I dare say. Where is he now?'

'Still at Whitby, I hear.'

'Whitby! that's a funny place for them to be! What are they doing there?'

'Enjoying themselves, I suppose, as people with money seem always able to do. Christopher said in his last letter that he had never been so well, and never so happy; I wrote and told Jack so. Papa, I do think it a great mistake to be poor—really I do.'

'I'm quite of your opinion, my dear; but that does not mend matters much with you or with me.'

'And then mother to be always going on about I wouldn't marry Jack. Well, I wouldn't; but if I had wanted to, he wouldn't have married me.'

'Tell her so, Georgy—tell her so.'

'And have it all over the place? why, no; that would never do. All the same, though, I think the Christopher Blunts owe a debt of gratitude to Colin and to me.' And at this point Mr. Cameron had joined them, and mooted the question of writing to Christopher. 'You might tell them that Jack has gone to India, too,' said Georgy, 'in case he had anything to do with their going away from here.'

So the letter was written, and sent off to Christopher, and then Mr. Cameron betook himself to Priors to pay Mr. Blunt a visit. He found him irritable and angry—his visitors had left him; and though he said nothing about the non-arrival of the expected letter, it was plain to see how much the disappointment affected him.

For the first time he blustered in his old way about his son, and then suddenly his

voice broke into almost a whine, as he demanded the curate's pity for a man left alone in his old age—deserted by his own flesh and blood, as he was.

'But I don't see that you can make that accusation against Christopher,' said Mr. Cameron stoutly. 'Think how often he has written and you have sent him no answer. The desertion—so it seems to me—rather lies at your door.'

Perhaps the reproach stung the father; anyway, Mr. Blunt put himself into an ungovernable rage. These recent bouts had lost him the small measure of control he ever had over his temper, and the picture given to Mr. Cameron then, made him sympathise with his two friends more than ever.

Returning home with those coarse vituperations against Robin still sounding in his

ears, Mr. Cameron wondered had he done right in urging their return.

'I've half a mind to write again,' he thought, 'and suggest that it might be best if Christopher came to see his father alone.'

Only a little time before Christopher had made a similar suggestion to Robin. 'It is of no use writing,' he had said; 'I see that. I have been thinking whether it would not be best for me to go and see my father and talk to him.'

The winter, so far rather a severe one, had taxed their resources considerably, and Christopher felt his health was suffering from some of the deprivations he had been obliged to submit to.

Perceiving that he was not well—for, constantly together as they were now, it

was impossible, as of old, to hide from her how much at times he suffered—Robin proposed that they should remove to London; and Christopher, hoping he might be benefited by the change to milder air, readily assented.

They made the journey in December, about a week before Christmas; the carriage they travelled in was cold and draughty, and Christopher took a chill which confined him to bed for a few days, and to the house for more than a week after. Anxious to get away from the hotel, the expenses of which they could ill afford, he did not give himself time to recover, and the first day he was able to dissemble he declared himself perfectly well, and able to set off in search of lodgings, which they hoped to find in one of the suburbs. Robin was prevailed on, though very unwillingly,

to remain behind: the fire was burning cold, and Christopher said he should get through his business quicker without her.

In addition to looking for the lodgings, he was bent on finding if his father had left London. Owing to their removal from Whitby, Mr. Cameron's letter had not yet reached him. If the old man was in Walpole, Christopher intended, after seeing Robin settled, to go down there. He knew with whom he had to deal, and nothing but an intimate knowledge of that overbearing temper had made him hold out as he had done. To do him justice, every letter he had written had been conciliatory, and he never permitted his father to perceive that the violence and insults heaped on him at their parting had in any way rested with him.

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going away he had been made to suffer, and the taunts that they would soon return, begging to be taken back, had assisted very greatly in keeping him away. It had not been a question of pride so much as one of self-respect; Christopher felt that after what had passed he owed it to himself, as well as to Robin, that the first advances towards capitulation should come from the aggressor. The object he had in seeking this interview was to come to a plain, straightforward understanding of what Mr. Blunt intended to do in respect to their future income. With the possibility of Robin by any chance accident being left alone in the world, Christopher trembled to think how little there would be for her. So far, there had been expensive articles of jewellery parted with to meet pressing occasions; but these were nearly all gone. Their wardrobe, too, needed

replenishing; Christopher's clothes were anything but suitable for such inclement weather.

Notwithstanding his fatigue, he returned to Robin in excellent spirits. His day had been a successful one; the lodgings he had secured he was certain would please her, and he had learned through Mr. Benson, whom he had seen, that his father had gone down to Priors.

'And I have something for you—a letter from Mr. Cameron,' said Robin. 'I wouldn't give it to you before, because I thought you wanted your dinner; and I haven't opened it, that we might read it together.'

She had put an easy-chair for Christopher in front of the fire, and she brought over a footstool and sat down at his knee, leaning her head against him, so that, with him, she might read the letter.

They went through the contents, neither stopping nor making comment until they reached the end; then, simultaneously, he said, 'I am very grieved to hear this about my father;' and she, 'Fancy, Jack gone to India, to see his mother!'

Many confidences had passed between Christopher and Robin during these six months together, and though Jack was seldom made the subject of conversation between them, there was no longer any awkwardness in speaking his name.

'I think the wish to see his mother says a great deal for him,' said Christopher, ever ready to sink what was of interest to him in that which interested her. 'It is a long voyage to make for affection, and it is hardly to be supposed that he feels more than duty for her.'

'No,' said Robin dreamily, and they sat

silent for awhile. Suddenly she asked: 'What was that about your father? I didn't quite take it in. Read it to me again.'

Christopher read what Mr. Cameron had said, and then he sighed heavily.

'Oh, but I shouldn't be in too great a hurry to believe it all,' said Robin encouragingly. 'You see he tells you,' she went on, referring to the letter, 'that what he says is principally from the rumours he has heard in the village.'

'Yes; but I don't think Cameron would write unless he felt certain that what he said was true.'

'At the same time, he speaks of your father being very anxious to see you.'

'Yes; I am glad I am going down.'

'When will you go?'

'I think the day after to-morrow. I

shall just wait to see you settled, and then —particularly after this—I won't delay it longer. Being laid up has been such a drawback; I had counted on seeing him before the new year.'

'Shan't you write to say you are coming?'

'No.'

'But supposing he isn't there?'

'Oh, I think he's sure to be. Cameron speaks as if he had gone down to remain; and it looks like it, having those people down there.'

'Do you know them?' Robin asked.

The vexed look in Christopher's face was plain to her.

'I dare say I know who they are,' he said sadly. 'That is the worst of his being left alone; he has no resources. You see, reading does not amuse him; he has nothing to

do, and no friends there who go to see him or whom he can go to see.'

'He must be very lonely. I wish he was different, Christopher,' and then she rubbed her cheek against his hand. 'I see,' she said, 'that what Mr. Cameron has said is paining you.'

'It is, a little.'

She laid down her head again, murmuring softly, 'Poor Christopher! dear Christopher!'

Had Robin never known love, surely this feeling might well have deceived her. Those to whom Happiness has not shown her face often pass through life mistaking Content for her.

But Robin had tasted of the higher joy; it lay as in a grave dug deep down in her heart, watered by her tears, sacred by her sorrow. As the mourner is won to lift again the drooping head, so Christopher's

tenderness and generosity had raised hers. Biding his opportunity, he had dropped words from time to time which had gradually taken root and sprung up to blossom. A higher motive guided Robin now, and Christopher rejoiced to feel that should he ever be called from her, no longer would that fair bark be left without a rudder.

Many of us fail to appreciate how much we owe to habit. In youth, impulse is a dangerous leader; and in the emergencies of life, unless daily practice has trained us to decide rightly, it is far more than likely that we are led astray.

There were moments when the past rose up before Robin and made her shudder. Some newspaper report, a repeated story, a chance encounter, and she drew closer to Christopher: from what a fate he had rescued her! Robin took no credit to her-

self. 'Had he not talked to me,' she said, 'that night as he did, what should I be now?' And then, thinking of Jack, how much more clearly did she read his character! Dealing generously with the forbearance he had shown when he had her in his power—for Robin recognised how from the first moment he had held complete influence over her—she sent her heart up in thanksgiving that Jack's life was still his own to shape, unfettered save perhaps by a memory of her. Her woman's nature clung to the hope of that memory; she could not bear to think that he could altogether forget her.

'I should like him sometimes to recall those days'—and a tear stole slowly down her cheek—'when he was penniless as we were—poor Jack!—and I was little Robin Veriker;' and her thoughts straying to that bygone past, she would think of the un-

taught, run-wild child she was, and of the teaching for good which Jack had tried to instil into her. And in those recollections love was forgotten in gratitude for the teacher; and tracing the development of those qualities higher, Jack's image would fade away, and his place be filled by Christopher.

CHAPTER IX.

MADE thoughtful by the contents of Mr. Cameron's letter, it did not seem strange that for the rest of the evening Christopher should be unusually silent. He did not tell Robin he felt so weary that mere ordinary speaking was an effort to him. In his own mind he set down this sense of fatigue to his late indisposition. 'That attack has pulled me down,' he said, 'and made me weaker than I thought myself.'

There had been a time in Christopher's

life when his weakly health, except so far as it interfered with his comfort, was a matter of very little concern to him; the world had not held out many attractions, and he was not disturbed in the least to think he might possibly be called on to leave it early. But since Robin had been his wife, and more particularly since this renewal of a good understanding between them, Christopher had been conscious of a desperate clinging to life, of building on the future, counting on long years to come, to be spent by Robin and him together.

'I feel rather tired,' he said at length, noticing that Robin had put down her book and was looking at him.

'Still you don't seem disposed to move.'

'No, that's just it. I could drop off to sleep here where I am, sitting in my chair.'

'Get along,' she said, giving him a shake;

'you go upstairs, and I'll tell them about calling us, and giving us our breakfast early.'

Naturally a light sleeper, Robin was surprised to find Christopher already asleep when she went into the room, and so soundly that he did not hear her enter.

He seemed to continue sleeping until morning, when, between three and four, he was awakened by a fit of shivering, increasing in violence, and becoming so severe, that Robin implored him to let her send for a doctor.

No; he thought it would pass; it was but a return of his cold. If she would put some more clothes on the bed, and, as soon as they were stirring, ask for some hot tea, he thought he should be better.

But in spite of all that Robin could do, her suggestions and remedies were of no avail; a terrible pain in the side seized him

—it was like the sticking of a knife each time he drew a breath. He got restless, feverish, and the suggestion of a doctor again made, he no longer opposed it.

The next day Christopher was announced to be suffering from a severe attack of pneumonia and pleurisy following on his previous indisposition. The doctor viewed the case gravely. 'He has caught cold again; got another chill,' he said. And Robin feared he had; but, unacquainted with illness as she was, a cold, which he frequently caught and always recovered from, gave her no alarm.

'He'll soon be all right again, don't you think?'

'Oh, I quite hope so. Why? were you thinking of sending for some one to help you?' The wish was put warily.

'No; I can do all the nursing he wants.

But he had thought of going to see his father.'

'Ah! I'm afraid he will have to put that off for some little time now. Would it not be as well to ask his father to come and see him?'

'Not at present, I think; we shouldn't care to.' And seeing there was actually at present no necessity, the doctor did not urge it further.

The next day, however, Christopher was worse. Then his mind began to wander; and Robin, frightened beyond measure at a symptom always distressing to those around, sent off a telegram to Mr. Blunt.

'Come directly this reaches you. Christopher is very ill.'

Again and again Mr. Blunt read these words over. The sight of them seemed to paralyse him; he was seized with the cer-

tainty that his son was dying—perhaps even dead before now. What should he do? When did the next train go? Already he had summoned a servant and sent him to seek information.

The next train was the 5.50, there was none before; it was now three o'clock. Three hours to wait! how should he endure them? The suggestions that went coursing through his mind seemed like to madden him.

'Go to Mr. Cameron,' he said at length, in desperation. 'Ask him to come to me. Say—I want him.'

He had meant to send word that Christopher was ill, but was unable to mention his son's name. At the moment when he was going to speak it, his voice had failed him.

From the servant Mr. Cameron learnt the cause of the summons, and with ready

sympathy at once obeyed it. How strangely altered seemed their relative positions since they last met! then Mr. Blunt's hectoring and bluster had completely cowed the sensitive organisation of the curate; his loud voice jarred upon him and drove him to silence. Now it was Mr. Cameron who spoke, Mr. Blunt who listened, hanging on every word of assurance and encouragement the other gave him.

Skilled in administering comfort, Mr. Blunt found himself gaining courage; he was another being since Mr. Cameron had come. But what would happen when he left him? there was still to be bridged over that two hours' journey in the train, and the drive from the station. Oh, the delay was sickening!

'Shall I go up with you? Would you like it?'

Mr. Blunt almost broke down under the weight of his gratitude; it was the very thing he had been longing for, but had not dared to ask. Those who never put themselves out to accommodate others, when wanting favours for themselves are apt to over-estimate their obligation.

It was nothing to Mr. Cameron to accompany him to London. He would have made the same offer, only more readily, to the poorest parishioner.

'Then pick me up at my lodgings as you go past,' he said; and away he rushed to run in at the rectory, so that they might know for what reason he had gone away.

'I'll walk down with you,' said Georgy; and there she was standing when Mr. Blunt drove up, ready with cheery words and good wishes to start them on their way.

'And tell Mrs. Christopher if she wants any help to send for me; I'm a first-rate hand at sick-nursing, you know.'

Who, at parting, shall say what their next meeting may be?

Mr. Blunt and Robin had never seen each other since that day when Christopher had come between them; then, furious, exasperated, their thoughts had been centred on themselves, their anger on each other. Now, when, with noiseless steps and knees that trembled under him, Mr. Blunt found himself at the door of the sick-room out of which Robin had come, both he and she seemed to have merged their individuality. For her, he was Christopher's father; for him, she was Christopher's wife. Had he taken her hand? Had she given it? What matter? they did not stop to consider. All

Mr. Blunt knew was that to his ear there came a muffled whisper: 'He will not know you, but he has been talking about you all day;' and then he tip-toed inside, and Robin went down to speak to Mr. Cameron.

They were still talking when Mr. Blunt joined them. His face was drawn, and there was an anxious look in his eyes; but the terrible fear, that by some accident his son had been killed—was already dead, had been relieved. He could breathe again, and hope had returned with the reaction.

'Who's the doctor you've called in?' he said to Robin. 'They spoke to me about a Mr. Martin; is that him? I shall send off at once for Gull, and I'll go myself for Sir William Jenner; he's the one you ought to have had, he's seen him before. And who was it that gentleman in the train was

speaking of, Mr. Cameron, as being so clever? Ah, yes, Lamb—that was the name; we'll have him.'

'But he's a homœopath!' said Mr. Cameron.

'I don't care what he is, so long as he cures my son!'

'You know in the profession they don't agree!'

'Then let 'em fight it out! I shan't ask the reason why, provided they'll set him on his legs again. I'll have every doctor in London, no matter who they are or what they call 'em; it's all one to me, so long as they can make a cure of him.'

The old bluster was coming back. The belief in his luck, and that things always came round right with him, was returning; he put his hands deep down into his pockets, opening and shutting his palms on

the imaginary gold that he would shower on the fortunate restorer of his son's health. Mr. Cameron, looking at him, sighed, and then he cast a glance at Robin.

'You seem very tired,' he said gently. 'I am afraid you have not had much rest.'

The remark attracted Mr. Blunt's notice.

'That was a nurse, wasn't it, I saw up there?'

'Yes, there is a nurse; but until somebody came I wouldn't leave him alone with her.'

'That was right—quite right,' said Mr. Blunt approvingly; adding in a more kindly tone: 'But you can go to bed now. I'm here now; I'll see after him. He shan't want for nothing; he shall have the best that money can get. Ah! the Prince himself shan't ha' been better 'tended on than he shall be. How it happened that he's

laid up like this I can't think. Whatever brought it on? Can you form an idea, eh?'

'The carriage we came in from Whitby was so cold and draughty,' said Robin; 'that was the first of it. He was very unwell then for more than a week, but he was so anxious to go and get lodgings and find out about you. Oh, I can see it all now!' she exclaimed, bursting into tears suddenly. 'His coat was so thin, and the day was bitterly cold, and the omnibuses were so full, that he had to go outside two of them.'

'Outside! Outside a 'bus! My son!' Mr. Blunt staggered a full pace back, staring at her.

'And he was away almost the whole day long,' she continued, 'without having anything proper to eat.'

'Why he must have been mad—clean

gone out of his senses! and you too, to have let him!'

She shook her head.

'You forget how anxious we were to go away from here. He knew how little money there was left, and a long bill owing.'

Mr. Blunt dropped down into a chair as if he had been shot at.

'My God!' he cried; 'I've killed him! He'll die—he'll die! I know he will. O Lord, what shall I do, what shall I do? what will become of me?' And hiding his face in his hands, the wretched old man burst into tears.

Robin jumped up and stood gazing at him with alarm. Mr. Cameron, with a ready guess at the remorse which had seized him, went over and put his hand upon his shoulder.

'Th' Almighty's going to punish me by taking him from me,' he went on brokenly; 'I holding out and he wanting. O Lord, spare him! only spare him, and I don't care what else comes to me!'

'Hush!' said Mr. Cameron sternly. 'You forget that God is not man. Do you think that our Heavenly Father is influenced by such motives as have made you stubborn and revengeful to your son? Let us down on our knees and ask mercy of Him; let us beg Him to spare Christopher to us. I will offer up a prayer in which we will all join."

And they all three knelt down, Mr. Blunt the first to shuffle off his chair, the last to rise. All his pomposity and swagger had gone from him; there was no more talk of what he was going to do; the all-important *I—I*—had dropped out of his conversation.

The whole neighbourhood far and near, for miles around, called to make inquiries after Christopher; and in place of ignoring Mr. Blunt, as formerly, he was asked for especially, to receive the congratulations everyone was anxious to give to him.

Snatched from the very jaws of death, Christopher had been brought back to Priors. Again he and Robin were living under the same roof as his father.

It was Robin herself who had made the proposal. Mr. Blunt had not dared to; and though Christopher was filled with an unspeakable yearning to be back in his old home, with its quiet and comforts around him, he forebore to let drop even a hint that might influence Robin in any way; but the one wish of her heart now was to make amends to Christopher. She wanted him to see, by her devotion, how she had learnt to

value his generosity. For far beyond anything it is possible to put into words had been his tenderness towards her—so enduring and so great that the confidence between them was complete ; and saving only where the knowledge would now give him pain, nothing was hidden by her. In this offer to return to Priors with his father, Robin saw another opportunity ; and in the joy with which Christopher received it, the pleasure and satisfaction he evinced, she was amply rewarded for any sacrifice it had cost her.

Still far too weak to be able to receive ordinary visitors, Mr. Cameron, and with him Georgy Temple, came daily to see him. Their engagement had become an acknowledged fact now, and the wonder and amazement of it past ; no one except Mrs. Temple troubled themselves about it.

Mr. Blunt had to confess himself staggered, and did not feel easy until he had trumpeted forth his penetration, and how he had hinted as much to her mother.

'Not,' he said, 'that then I took it by any means for granted, you know; but she was happening to be mentioning a certain gentleman who had popped off in a hurry after getting his *congee*,' and he nodded his head and winked his eye meaningly; 'and I asked her if it mightn't have something to do with a certain Mr. C——, who didn't live fifty miles off from here.'

Robin was close by, and Georgy for a moment felt a little confused before her. What would she think of this story her mother had gone about telling, that she had refused Jack? Looking at Robin, she said frankly:

'My mother will have it that my cousin

made an offer to me; but those who know him and me best are better informed on the matter.'

It was Robin's turn now to grow red, Christopher's to come to the rescue.

'But everyone knew,' he said, 'that Mr. Dorian-Chandos meant always to go. I remember the very first time I saw him he spoke of his intention to travel.'

'And he did go once,' said Mr. Cameron, 'and came back again. Oh, how I did dislike that fellow that night! and the odd thing was I couldn't think why, for it hadn't struck me then about being in love with Georgy, you know.'

The laugh turned against him gave the conversation a little diversion, and it wandered away from Jack into a discussion on the prospects of marriage and the hopes entertained by Mr. Cameron regarding a

living. How pleasant it was to lie there and listen to the banter which went on between them! Many times Christopher found himself laughing quietly, more especially when, after a time, Robin had been drawn in and was led away to be as merry as it was her wont to be.

That night, walking home, Mr. Cameron gave Georgy the history of the probation their two friends had gone through, and how close the recent trial had drawn them together.

'I love that girl,' he said, speaking of Robin; 'and you, Georgy, you must love her too.'

'Well,' she said, 'I don't say that I won't. I'm a little inclined that way already, which speaks volumes for my good disposition, seeing that the two men I think most of have each separately made that same demand of me already.'

'Yes, but mine is in a very different way.'

'No,' she said stoutly; 'I don't know that it is. When Jack asked me to be good to her, he had not a thought beyond being her friend; the mistake he made was in being over-confident.'

Later on, when Georgy had convinced herself by seeing the good understanding which existed between the husband and wife, she purposely introduced Jack's name.

'I want to get over,' she said, 'the little awkwardness there seems to be in talking about him. Some day he will return, and then what are we to do?'

So to Robin when alone, or, if together with Christopher, she began speaking of Jack, telling them where he had been, what he had seen, what he was doing.

'He had just reached Calcutta when he wrote last,' she said, on one occasion.

'It must be a great pleasure to see his mother,' Robin ventured to say.

'H'm!' and Georgy puckered up her face. 'I can't say; from the tone of his letter it did not particularly strike me that he would break his heart over their parting. But I know her—at least I know her through my father, and that is quite enough for me.'

'Does he intend to stay long?' asked Christopher.

'Not with her—I don't think he does. I don't think he quite knows what he means to do; sometimes he speaks of returning, sometimes of going on. Papa wants him to come home at once, but I don't know whether he'll do so. He hasn't asked my advice, or I'd settle his plans in the twinkling of an eye.'

'Why, what advice would you give

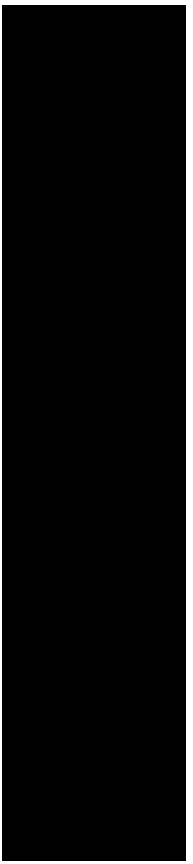
him?' said Christopher. 'I'm curious to know.'

'In the first place, I should tell him to come back for reasons that make it important he should be here; and secondly, I should recommend him to settle down and take a wife to look after him—he'll have to marry — he must! Who's the estate to go to?'

Jack marry! Jack have a wife! The thought rushed upon Robin as if such an idea had never presented itself to her before. She felt obliged to move, to alter her position. She put down the work she had in her hand, and stood up for a moment, almost unconscious of what she was doing.

'Are you going for my medicine?' Christopher asked, and Robin was off, relieved by the necessity of something to do.

All that evening she was more than ordi-



had come to him since he had been here. Surely never before had the place looked so lovely, the fields so green, the sky so blue; in every passing change of nature a fresh beauty seemed opened to Christopher's eyes. The budding trees, the bursting blossom, all seemed to him to speak of that Hand which made these things so fair to see.

'What are you thinking of, Christopher?' Robin would ask, as he lay there with his eyes fixed, silent, lost in thought; and brought back to earth, Christopher would say:

'I don't think I was thinking at all. I was only wondering, when all is so beautiful here, what can heaven be?'

* * * *

Although removed from immediate danger, Christopher's recovery was anything but complete. The doctors who had

narily devoted to Christopher; watching him, she seemed to anticipate every wish and want, and when the others had left, and they two were alone, she went over to him, and while settling his cushions, said:

'Christopher, I want you to get strong; you must make haste, and be as quick as ever you can, and let us get away from here and go to some place where it is sunny and warm, and you will get well. I am longing to be off with you again.'

'Oh, you may depend upon me! I'm not going to waste my time; I'm going to put my back into it, I can tell you!'

He spoke cheerily, although his heart was not in what he said. Far rather than go anywhere away, would he remain where he was. Already the invalid dread of travel and bustle possessed him, while each day seemed to increase the sweet repose which

had come to him since he had been here. Surely never before had the place looked so lovely, the fields so green, the sky so blue; in every passing change of nature a fresh beauty seemed opened to Christopher's eyes. The budding trees, the bursting blossom, all seemed to him to speak of that Hand which made these things so fair to see.

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Although removed from immediate danger, Christopher's recovery was anything but complete. The doctors who had

seen him dwelt much on the benefit to be derived from a milder climate, and the efforts of those around him were directed towards building up strength sufficient for him to undertake the journey. Since his return to Wadpole his improvement had been so marked as to justify hopes being entertained for a speedy departure.

'It'll be a hard matter for me to bear up when he goes away,' Mr. Blunt had said to Mr. Cameron; adding in answer to the curate: 'Oh, they won't want me; there's never been a mention of my going. I should only be one in the way—as I expect I am now very often!'

Jealous as he still remained, the old man was at length learning the hard task of yielding up his will for the sake of his son.

'Here, you give it to him,' he would say to Robin, when he had been at much pains

to procure something he fancied Christopher might like. 'He'll take it from you—eat it if you ask him.'

Little did Robin ever guess the sting it gave him to say those words. Mr. Blunt had suffered a martyrdom before he had been brought to confess that she might have a precedence before himself.

Since Christopher had been mending, except in an indirect way to Mr. Cameron, Mr. Blunt had never reverted to the circumstances which had caused his son's illness. Finding when he came home that everyone attributed it to the draughty carriage in which he had travelled from Whitby, Mr. Blunt adopted the reason which the curate had circulated; but compunction was still the mainspring of all his actions, and often when sitting silently by, as those around thought dozing, he would be going over

that six months' struggle, every detail of which, in those first few days of the illness, he had made Robin relate to him.

With Christopher he had never approached the subject: to hint at it in any way he found impossible. Actions, not words, must tell Christopher how sorely he repented. To everyone his changed manner to his son was visible, and it established their good opinion of him that he continued to show so much feeling and delicacy. Among others, the rector noticed it; and one day, paying a visit to Christopher, in token of his interest he said:

'I wish your father had something that would interest and occupy him. He must find time hang very heavy on his hands.'

'I fear he does,' said Christopher. 'I often wish he had something to do; but at

his age a fresh pursuit is difficult to take up.'

'It is.'

'Particularly to one accustomed to manual labour, as he has been. Work—if not the actual work itself, superintending such as he has been used to—that is what would really interest him, and he'd do it well, too.'

'Then why don't you give him the opportunity? He was talking before you came down of finding you a house: express a wish that he should build one for you.'

A slight flush came into Christopher's face.

'Sometimes,' he said, 'I think I may never want one.'

'Come, you must not talk like that,' said the rector encouragingly. 'I trust before long we shall see you on your legs again.'

Christopher smiled.

be certain to pass on the living to Georgy's husband.'

'Should we have to get his consent about Uplands?'

'I suppose we should. I'm not very well up in such matters, but of course he'd have to be asked; he's patron of the living, and lord of the manor too.'

'When you write, would you ask him?'

Mr. Temple hesitated.

'I don't know that I have any right to say "No;" but the cost would be very great, and your father——'

'Oh, leave my father to me.' He laid his hand on his heart. 'Something here tells me,' he said, 'that when I see my way to asking him, he won't refuse me.'

'Neither will I, then. Make your mind easy; I'll write to the Squire for you.'

CHAPTER XI.

THE same mail which took out Mr. Temple's letter to Jack, took one also from Georgy.

'. . . Everyone is wishing you back,' she wrote. 'The other night, at "Priors," with the Christopher Blunts, we were all talking of you. Have you heard how ill he has been?—not expected to recover, but now mending, and ordered abroad immediately? They will start as soon as he can go, and I do not know when it is likely they will be

back again. Perhaps I may as well say I have grown much more lenient to your once-upon-a-time weakness for Robin; the truth is, I know her now, and my verdict on you would be, "He couldn't help it." You have no idea how devoted to her husband she is —quite different to anything we used to see. The love is by no means all on one side now, as I once feared it might be.

'I have no separate news to tell, and, as papa is writing, you shall be spared repetition. He will let you know how much you are wanted at home, but by no one more than me; so come back, Jack, *do!* Your would-be cousin, Colin Cameron, still continues spasmodically jealous of you. Yet my cry is, Come—come soon, by return of post if you can; only come! come! come!'

Who shall separate love from jealousy?

Jack crushed up the letter in his hand, as if it contained something he could not bear to see. Then he said:

'Well! why not? What good is there in staying away? If they are not there, I may as well go.' And he stood hesitating, frowning, measuring the attraction to return with the temptation which had driven him away.

When a man has come out of such a furnace as Jack had passed through, he dreads the heat of the fire, although it is afar. But subtle as love's power is, most men have interests in life in which it plays no part. On these, of late, Jack had tried to fix his thoughts. It was in the distraction they would bring that his hopes were centred.

He had done with love for ever, so he said; and, saying it, he would straightway

fall to dreaming about Robin, recalling bitterly the time when, knowing her love was solely his, he had held it but cheaply.

'*If* I had but spoken to her then!'

Ah, little '*if*,' how great a part you play in many a life-long tragedy!

Besides these two letters from Georgy and Mr. Temple, there were several others of more or less importance, all bearing on the advisability of return.

The country was in an agitated state; the county member was an old man; there was a very general feeling in Wadpole that his mantle would fall befittingly on the shoulders of Mr. Dorian-Chandos. But how could it reach him when so far away? Moreover, it was highly essential to the Liberal interest that a popular representative ready to step in should be near. Then on the estate the tenants were dissatisfied;

a fear was spreading that, like his uncle, Jack did not mean to live among them.

'I must go back,' he said; 'I can't go farther on, that's plain. And if what Georgy says is true, it ought to make my task easier. After the first I need not live there altogether; and when they are there I need not see much of them. At all events the thing has to be done, and I must do it!"

For the moment decision generally makes us feel lighter. Jack gathered up his correspondence, spread out Georgy's letter, folded it up, and with the rector's put those two separate together. 'I can't make out what it is that he means about Uplands, and the Blunts building a church there.' And in truth the rector had intentionally been rather vague; he was somewhat in doubt himself whether it might not prove

a sick man's fancy. Everyone could see that Christopher's state was critical; but then he had always been delicate, and those creaking doors were proverbial for lasting out those that looked stronger. However, if it never came to anything—and raising it on old Blunt's gratitude was very much like a foundation of sand—so long as it helped to bring Jack home he did not mind. Mr. Temple had a keen relish for politics; and since this distant rumour of a dissolution he had been anxious beyond measure that Jack should return. The half of his letter had been filled with what this one thought, and that one said; and these expressions of his neighbours' good opinion naturally gratified Jack's pride immensely.

A man is worth little who feels no ambition. And already Jack's thoughts had run so far ahead that his canvassing was over;

he had obtained his seat, and was making his maiden speech in Parliament.

What is it that ofttimes, in a moment, turns the current of our thoughts, and of a sudden brings us face to face with some forgotten danger? There, spread out before him as he had never seen it until now, lay the whole of that misery which, had not Christopher interfered and his better self prevailed, would have been now entailed on him and his for ever! 'Thank God!' he said fervently; and so great a hold had it taken on him that he had to wipe the damp moisture from his forehead.

Perhaps until now Jack had never realised how much value he set on all he would have forfeited. Mentally he drew a picture of himself as he would have been, with the world condemning him and its back turned on him. Exiled from his

home, dreading to meet friends and neighbours, forced into company with those he despised, driven to seek distraction where he could find it. And then Robin! Oh! his soul was stirred, his heart grew sick recalling women he had known in the position she would have been in. Although they might be separated for ever, a thousand times rather as they were! He had her memory still to hold dear, the memory of his pet, his plaything, his child-love Robin, with which none living could interfere; and those days coming back, they brought with them recollections of her, games they had had together, lessons he had taught her, little things she had learnt to do for him. Again he watched the would-be nimble fingers struggling with the buttons she wanted to master. And then once when something ailed him, her ecstasy at his consenting to

take some *tisane* she had made, the eager face, the loving, tender eyes—ah, how little changed since then! 'Never!' he said; 'No other one could ever fill her place.' Love lay buried in his heart, and over it 'Sacred to Robin' was written.

A very sober mood hung over Jack that day, set down by his mother to their approaching separation. Lady Malcolm, never having troubled herself about her son in her life, suddenly discovered for him the most ardent affection. 'And the dear boy is so attached to me,' she said to those around; 'naturally he feels, who else is there that can take such an interest in his welfare?' And in token of this, Jack was let have no peace on one subject—he must get married; he ought to get married; whom would he marry?

'But think, my dear—only consider. You must some day marry somebody.'

Lady Malcolm felt her time was short; she must make the most of it.

'Must I?' said Jack, unmoved. 'I don't see the necessity. I have spent twenty-seven years of single life very happily.'

'You forget that your uncle was alive. You had nothing to leave then—no responsibility.' Jack looked no more convinced. 'What would become of the estate, with no brothers; unfortunately, none that can inherit after you.'

So far as the small Malcolms were concerned, Jack felt devoutly thankful.

'Oh, there are the Temples,' he said inadvertently.

'The Temples! What Temples? the George Temples? *that* family!'

'*That* family,' echoed Jack, imitating her emphasis.

Lady Malcolm sniffed the air with contracted nostrils, as if even at that distance their odour was offensive to her. 'I always detested Maria Temple,' she said, 'and I dislike her husband inexpressibly; and there are no sons there.' The want made her voice more cheerful.

'There are daughters, though,' said Jack maliciously, his back a little up now. When she had not cared what became of him, the Temples had always made a home for the lonely boy. 'Isabel, the married one; Dora, the youngest; and Georgy.'

'Georgy! why does she get separate mention?'

'Because she is deserving of separate notice, besides being an especial favourite with me.'

'Oh, really! I was not aware! My

future daughter-in-law, I presume, that is to be?'

'No,' said Jack stolidly; 'she wouldn't have me.'

His mother gave a contemptuous little laugh.

'I don't see how you can possibly suppose that;' and then her tone altered, and with a sharp look at him she added: 'unless you've asked her already.'

Jack did not reply.

'I won't believe it!' she said angrily; 'don't tell me that one of those girls—one of Maria Temple's daughters—has refused you?'

'My good mother, pray spare me! As you yourself often say, we must draw a line somewhere, and I draw mine at naming the young ladies who have rejected me.'

'Ridiculous! absurd!' said Lady Mal-

colm. 'I hate mysteries! if you can't have confidence between a mother and a son, where is it to be?' and fearing if she stayed longer her ruffled feelings might lead to a further display of temper, she left Jack to himself, determined to write to Wadpole by that mail and find out what truth there was in this story.

Few moments come more sadly than those in which we realise that some one very near to us has no part in what we feel or what we do. Just now Jack had a terrible hungering after a little sympathy, not so much in speech as in person. He wanted to talk with some one, to open himself out, in a way; and he had to confess that his mother was further off from him now than when they were, except in name, absolutely strangers one to another. Looking at her picture from time to time—

she was a very beautiful woman when the portrait had been taken—Jack had built a castle in the air, which had crumbled in pieces the very day after his arrival. It was his first experience of worldliness in the midst of domesticity, and the atmosphere of the home disagreed with him entirely.

He felt at once that after having fulfilled the decent requirements entailed by such a far-off visit, he should be only too glad to get away; and he set down to this feeling the hurry he was in to make the arrangements for his departure. He did not write to say he was coming, because he should get to England almost as soon as his letter; and he had seldom experienced a more thorough sense of relief than when he had made his farewells and was fairly started on his homeward journey. A feverish haste

possessed him to get back; and now, the monotony of steamer-life beginning, it struck him a little drearily that he had not much of personal interest to go back to—he could not even claim Georgy now as he used.

'I suppose,' he thought, 'she'll be wanting to get married. Fancy her choosing that curate chap!' There was a *soupçon* of humiliation in the fact. Certainly, even up to the time of his leaving, Jack had always believed in an under-current of more than sisterly regard entertained for himself by Georgy. 'I wonder,' he said, 'if nothing of this sort had come about, whether in time I should have brought myself to think about it;' and after a few minutes' reflection: 'No,' he said, 'never; it would be like marrying a sister to marry Georgy.'

Jack had got rid of his mother, but the

thoughts of marriage still pursued him. When one has something to leave, he wants somebody to leave it to. Who was that somebody to be?

CHAPTER XII.

DURING the first few weeks after Christopher Blunt returned to Wadpole, so marked and visible was the improvement he daily made that it began to be counted on as all but certain that before long he would be sufficiently convalescent to bear the fatigue of another removal.

Those who congratulated Mr. Blunt on his son's recovery further cheered the old man by pointing out that this power of regaining strength argued a sound constitution, and doubtless, though Christopher

might never be more robust than he had hitherto been, it was not impossible he would outlive many who now came to make inquiries about him.

Already a dozen plans were under discussion as to where their first move should be, Robin receiving more gratitude than he once would have conceived it possible to give her, because, without in any way asking the question, she had assumed it a matter of course that Mr. Blunt should accompany her and Christopher.

Happily the weather was not very severe, and nothing now but a little more strength was needed to commence their journey. But having reached, and very rapidly too, a certain stage of recovery, Christopher seemed to come to a standstill, and nothing that was suggested, or thought of, seemed to advance him further.

Mr. Blunt, finding ease in the feeling that he was doing something, summoned from London one physician after another, but with no better result than all agreeing, that additional strength must be gained before it would be prudent to move him. How was that strength to be obtained? No one seemed able to solve the question. Christopher, happy, tranquil, surrounded by those he best loved, seemed the only one not disturbed by the delay.

Since February, when they had brought him down to Wadpole, the winds of March had blustered and swept by, the showers of April had watered leaf and bud, and now May was coming to a close—fresh, flowery May, sweet month of blossom. Very sorely had the shifting beauties of this fickle spring tried Christopher; even Robin and his father could shut their eyes no longer, and

although neither confessed it even to themselves, each felt a terrible heart-sinking that in spite of all their efforts he was getting weaker.

Cheerful as he always was to them, striving to make light of his pains and troubles, this certainty had not escaped him either; and one day when Mr. Cameron was sitting with him, he said suddenly, and apropos of nothing:

'I don't believe that I shall ever get better, Cameron.'

Mr. Cameron was silent.

'You don't think so, do you?' he went on to say, now pausing for a reply.

'Well, I don't know that it counts for anything what I may think. I have so often taken it into my head that people won't recover and they do, that positively I begin to fancy I must be an alarmist—

rather inclined to look on the dark side of things, you know.'

Christopher smiled.

'I never discovered it before,' he said.

'No; haven't you? I imagine I am, though,' and Mr. Cameron sighed a little despondingly. Of late he had been terribly cast down about his friend. It seemed to him easier to give up all the people in Wadpole than to part with Christopher. Constant companions the two had become. Not a day went by without some portion of it being spent together.

Mr. Blunt was never better pleased than when the curate was with them. With the knowledge of past circumstances which he possessed, he could thoroughly unburden himself to Mr. Cameron, and give free vent to those self-reproaches which so terribly oppressed him.

'These illnesses give us ample time to reflect,' said Christopher, resuming the conversation.

'They do indeed. To me the illnesses in our lives are like stepping-stones across the dark river. At each one we pause and look back.'

'And forward, too.'

And the beautiful hope lighting up Christopher's face was reflected back in Mr. Cameron's.

'Ah!' continued Christopher, grasping the hand stretched out towards him, 'events are often ordered for us far better than at first we see. There was a time, as you know, when the thought of leaving all behind was a terrible wrench to me; but not now—that is past—that has been taken away.'

Noting things going on around, which it was thought he did not see, Christopher was

aware of much which those near fancied hidden from him: the efforts at control made by his father and by Robin, so that no contention between them might disturb him in any way; the struggle gone through by each; the will subdued, the sharp words swallowed down—all was but the surface of veneer. Let the necessity go by, and the old arrogance and dislike was certain to burst forth on the part of his father.

And then, through the confidence freely given him while they were together, he was able now to more clearly understand Robin's character. Unconsciously she had delivered to him the plummet by which he could sound the depths of her nature. Her heart given once, there it would stay. However deep down she might bury Jack, the memory of past love would abide with her for ever. Nothing was hidden that Christopher did

not know. Long ago all had been confessed, and all forgiven her.

Watching her, letting his gaze rest upon her as she sometimes sat, unconscious that her dreamy eyes betrayed the thoughts that strayed afar, Christopher's heart would ask a question, 'Of what, of whom, was she thinking?' In the life she led now, there was such a lack of occupation, so many hours with nothing to do, nothing to make any call upon her. Idleness is a most seductive danger; to those who have anything to forget, tired limbs often lessen the weight of heavy hearts.

Robin was young, and when the years are few the stream of fancy runs so swift and strong, that every passing breath has power to set it flowing.

True, Christopher had but to move, to sigh, to speak, and in an instant Robin's

care and thoughts were wholly centred on him. She was at his side, had taken his hand; her head was nestled close down. Ah yes! a thousand sorrows might be more sad than to be taken now! But though he had tried to speak of the possibility of having to leave her, he had never found words to tell her of this fear. The mere approach of any doubt seemed to fill her with alarm; the old look came back into her face which he remembered seeing there when together they were watching her father.

So, except to Mr. Cameron, Christopher kept silent as to his misgivings. Besides, all was not yet lost; hope still very often alternated with fear, and though seeing very clearly the gravity of his condition, he was aware that much yet remained in his favour. If he could but get sufficient strength to go

away and try the prolonged benefit of some purer atmosphere, even the particular doctor to whom his faith was pinned did not despair.

It was he who from his childhood had known Christopher. He had attended his mother, had been told the family history, and, with Mr. Blunt, shared a knowledge of his disease which others knew nothing of.

It was the recollection of those previous warnings given to him which now stung Mr. Blunt so severely in the midst of what he was doing. Suddenly, without any apparent reason, back would come some speech he had made, some wish that he had uttered. How, thinking that money was running short, fancying that they must be pinched, he had hoped from his heart and soul it might be so. He'd starve them out; want would soon bring them to their senses. If

they didn't know how to behave themselves, he'd teach them.

Unhappy old man, these recollections now seemed to madden him! To deaden their pain, he would rush to the only remedy he knew of; but with the dram in his hand, he would pause, put it down, and turn away—even the solace of oblivion he was ready to forfeit, fearing that it might be displeasing to Him who could restore Christopher.

There was a terrible bitterness in the feeling that he was mocked by prosperity. Except in that one matter of his son, everything was going well with him. Never had his lucky star seemed more in the ascendant. Shares which for years had been worth next to nothing daily began to rise in value; ground which he had bought for a mere song people made him good offers for; speculations, risky, wild, entered into

when he was not quite master of his usual judgment, all turned to gold and prospered; and in the midst there was a canker-spot which blighted everything, making what would have been joy, heaviness, and what should have been sweet, bitter.

Though the riches of the whole world should come to him, of what value would they be with no one, when he was dead and gone, to leave them to?

In past days, before this dread had come, he had been full of rant and bluster as to what he meant to do. He would marry again, take another wife, have another family to make his heirs and leave his riches to. Now that the blow had fallen, every resource seemed taken away. Not a single thought of comfort presented itself to him.

'Father,' said Christopher one day, when, with the hope of interesting him, Mr. Blunt

had been speaking of the unexpected increase in the value of some mining shares which for years had not paid a penny; 'Father, if I get well, will you build a church for me?'

'Will I do what, my boy?'

Christopher repeated the question.

'A church!' said the old man in amazement. 'Why, you're not thinking of turning parson, are you?'

'No, it's not that; for my recovery—a thank-offering I should like it to be.'

'Ah! I'd give most of all I possess to see that brought about.' Then, fearing that he had spoken despondingly, he hastened to add: 'And so we shall, I hope, in good time; only it seems rather long in coming. But there, it doesn't do to be in too much of a hurry; Rome wasn't built in a day.'

Christopher smiled.

'I've been thinking as I lay here,' he said, 'how nice it would be to have something to point to,—to show, so that people might say, 'Look! he built that, in memory of his son!'

'I don't know what you mean,' said the old man hoarsely. 'How in memory?'

A terrible grip had seized hold of him; his breath seemed to die away.

'In memory of my recovery,' said Christopher simply. 'Don't you know how in old times people made vows if certain things occurred what they'd do?'

'Well? and did it come to pass what they wanted?'

'Generally, I think. Very often it did.'

Mr. Blunt gave a sigh. Drowning man as he was, with every hope of safety sinking from his sight, each straw of promise was a thing to clutch at. If God—whom in

prosperity he forgot and in trouble feared—was to be propitiated by the building of a church, he'd at once strike the bargain, and promise that the handsomest money could raise should be built without delay. He'd superintend it himself; it would be a work to occupy, to amuse him.

Christopher, unable to guess at these resolutions, concluded that his hesitation sprang from the outlay such an undertaking would entail.

'You always say how lucky your life has been, father.'

'Yes; and so I've had cause to. Up to now,' he added discontentedly.'

'In many ways God has been very good to you,' continued Christopher.

The old man gave a half-hearted nod of assent.

'I'm not making any complaint,' he said

doggedly; 'although a good deal of what's been done has been taken out of late in all I've seen you forced to suffer. So if anything 'll come of building churches, I'll raise one in every parish you like to name, so it puts you on your legs again. You're all I've got to look to, Christopher; so you must set to work to get well, 'cos of your old father.'

Christopher smiled encouragingly, but the father could not smile back; the look that lighted up his son's face stabbed him to the heart. He had to make a pretence of getting up to turn away, and stand looking for a moment out of the window.

'From there, towards the right, you can see Uplands,' said Christopher. 'If the church stood on the hill, its spire would be visible from this window. And Cameron must be the rector; then he and Georgy

Temple could marry, and she wouldn't be separated from her father. Only think how many that would be making happy—me, Cameron, Georgy, and Mr. Temple! I call that getting at once the value of the money.'

'Very well; we'll talk the matter over again a little later. I see Robin coming up the walk; I think at present we won't mention it before her.'

The instinct of suffering was beginning to make Mr. Blunt tender towards those who suffered. His own pain made him quick to detect the ring of the true metal; and though many sympathised with his trial, he knew that none but Robin shared in his agony.

CHAPTER XIII.

SO as the months passed by the busy world went on its daily round, and the atom of it called Wadpole, while watching its course and the events in which it was pleased to fancy it had some share, grew unmindful of the interests close at hand, and ceased to be engrossed in the affairs of those who but a short time before had furnished the constant topic of conversation.

Every now and again a report that young

Blunt was worse would set them speculating, and surmises would be freely hazarded as to whether the old man would marry again; and if he did or if he did not, what would become of Robin? The feeling of wanting to get rid of them had long since been swept away. Mr. Blunt's anticipations had been more than verified. Had they been able to receive them, no one in the neighbourhood would have refused an invitation to Priors.

Georgy Temple was there every day: she and Robin were now thoroughly friends together; and if ever Robin went driving or walking to get the air, Georgy was sure to be with her. It had been so arranged in the family that while the two went out, Mr. Cameron took Robin's place by Christopher's side, and bore him company.

Of those who saw him now, only two

still clung to hope; and of necessity these were the two to whom he was most dear, Robin and his father.

It was not that they did not see what others saw, but they could not give him up. With them hope meant Christopher; to abandon one was to resign the other. The struggle they well knew would come; only they strove to keep it off a little longer.

Alas! how pitiful are the poor pretences to which in such straits as these we have recourse, how we talk of things in which there is neither heart nor interest, only that they serve to drift speech away from that which is absorbing and uppermost.

At that terrible dinner which she and Mr. Blunt took each day together—Robin making no opposition because Christopher wished it, and Mr. Blunt forced into acquiescence because had he said 'No' he might

have been asked his reason—every time they took their seats there was on the old man's part the same assumption of his pompous manner; he brisked himself up, and puffed himself out, as if intending to do full justice to the dishes that were placed before him. He blamed Robin for not eating, and then sent his own plate away untouched; would press her to take some wine—some special wine that he had got up for her—and leave his own glass untasted.

It began to give him pain to see the young girlish face grow so pinched and thin, the cheeks lose their colour and roundness. Mockery! Was it coming to him to cling to Robin? For the first time for months, when he reproved her for taking no care of her health, his voice sounded sharply.

Akin to what took place at dinner was the pantomime gone through each time the

doctor's visit was paid. Mr. Blunt greatly here relieved by the strictures he permitted himself to pass on the want of knowledge displayed by him. 'What,' he asked, 'could you expect from a country practitioner, a man whose life was spent in seeing farmers and ploughboys?' Necessarily he judged everybody else by them. You need have the strength and constitution of a horse to satisfy such a man! Of course he thought Christopher weak—how should he think otherwise? Years ago, when they first came to Wadpole, he had been called in and had said the very same thing then, and shook his head in despair over what turned out to be nothing worse than a cold!

But in spite of his dissatisfaction, he hung back from sending for the other doctor —the one man in whom his confidence was placed. He knew that when he came

he would not only have to hear the truth, but he would have to accept it; and with a certain dread foreboding of what that truth would be, he delayed the summons, until a day came when Christopher was so much worse that without a word from anyone he sent off the letter, begging the great physician to come without delay.

* * * *

Silent, brooding, apart from the rest, the old man spent the morning in his library; but as the hour drew near, forced by the fear of breaking down to assume more than his ordinary pompous manner, few would have guessed the weight of sorrow, the agony of despair, which that show of bounce and swagger was meant to cover.

'My friend, you grow worse as you grow older,' thought the doctor; and Robin herself, troubled as she was, felt condemned at

the shame for him which rose up within her: it seemed like being disloyal to Christopher, more especially as, instead of noticing it, he seemed more affectionate than usual towards his father. Clear-sighted as he had grown, Christopher penetrated the disguise, saw what this manner was meant to cover.

Pressed by the number of his engagements, the great man had explained that he should be forced to leave as soon as the sick visit was over. There was a train which would take him back to London, if he could get in time to the station. How Mr. Blunt fussed about the carriage being ready! how he deplored that the doctor could not stay for luncheon! what a parade he made of the dainties that had been provided for him! One might have imagined he had no other care, so com-

pletely did he throw himself into every matter which had no connection with his son.

Unable to control her emotion, Robin had slipped out of the room. She would wait below until the doctor had gone, and then return. Already footsteps were on the stairs; Mr. Blunt and he were coming down.

'I should like to say a word to you alone before I go.'

Mr. Blunt opened the door of the library, and they went in.

What was it he wanted to say? Robin felt she must wait and know; if but a crumb of comfort, she must have it; if all hope was crushed out for ever, she must hear it. Suspense had become intolerable; she could bear it no longer.

Oh, what an interminable time those few

minutes of waiting seemed to be! Would they never come?

The handle of the door turned. Robin breathed again. Mr. Blunt's voice sounded louder than ever. It must be all right, and what he had heard must be good. He was talking fast, though she could not hear about what — laughing, loudly and discordantly, but still laughing, as the carriage drove away.

For an instant she watched it going, and then quickly turned herself round. The door had opened; Mr. Blunt had come in, and there, standing before her, was a man whose face was ashen, his cheeks drawn in and sunken, his head drooped, his whole self fallen together.

Involuntarily she made a step forward.

'It's all over,' he said; 'all over. Nobody can't do nothing for him.' And for

a second the two stood gazing blankly into each other's eyes.

Then, as if the weight of sorrow had rent her heart, there burst forth from Robin a cry, echoed by the old man, and they fell into each other's arms, and together sobbed on one another's necks.

Grief, the one common grief, had overleapt all barriers. What was there to be remembered except that they must lose Christopher? The fiat had gone forth—nothing more could be done for him. He might linger a few days, or longer, but there upstairs he lay—dying. Death was waiting at the door; already the shadow of his chill presence had fallen in that chamber.

'Robin, you'll stay with me? You'll stop here. I know I haven't acted right by you before, but you won't leave a broken-down, childless old man, will you?'

'Never,' she said.

'You promise me that?'

'I do. I promise that, so long as I live, to me you shall always be Christopher's father.'

CHAPTER XIV.

GENEROUS hearts do nothing by halves.

Constantly now, looking round the room in which Christopher lay, Robin would ask, 'Where is your father? I must go and fetch him.' And coming on the old man, stricken down and lonely, she would take him by the hand and lead him to the bedside of his son, and there together they would sit, Christopher trying to win them from present sorrow by making plans of what he wished them to do when he should be no longer near.

The reconciliation brought about between these two, to him most dear, had robbed death of its last sting. In that first freshness of his grief, his father would not be left alone, and, so long as she needed them, Robin would have a home and a protector.

Very tenderly had Christopher commended his young wife to the care of his father, who, in his turn, had promised most solemnly to perform all he was asked to do for her.

There was no need to make any demands of Robin. Knowing what Christopher would desire, his wishes were forestalled by her, and the best earnest of her future conduct was given in her present manner.

Perfect faith, perfect hope, peace within, at charity with all the world—who might not envy Christopher?

It was only for those from whom he was

going that pity was needed, and daily, as he lingered on, the sympathy with them grew stronger.

People around talked about them, discussed them, spoke of them in their letters; so that it happened that Jack, just landed at Southampton and gone on to London to give some directions to his lawyer, was told by Mr. Clarkson of the sorrowful news about that 'well-meaning young Blunt, who lay dying,' of his wife's devotion, and the grief of the heart-broken old father.

'Christopher—Christopher Blunt, dying!'

Could it be true — was it possible? though Jack said but little in answer, he felt as if a blow had been dealt him which he staggered under. He left the office like one in a dream, to return an hour or so later, and desire that the papers which were to have followed him to Wadpole

should be kept where they now were, as he had altered his plans and was going to remain in London.

In the meantime he had written to the rector announcing his arrival, and had enclosed a note to Georgy, begging for an immediate answer.

Come what might—however his interests might suffer—if this news proved true he could not go to Wadpole; there would be a want of decency, of decorum in doing so. It might reach the ears of Christopher, and give him pain—might cause him perhaps to think worse things than he now did.

The whole day, no matter what he did or where he went, he could not rid himself of thoughts of Christopher. His face haunted him; his eyes pursued him; a sense of having done him an injury weighed on him like a nightmare.

If it was only possible that he could know something of what he felt—could have known how from his heart and soul Jack thanked him for what he had done, and what he had spared him from!

Casual acquaintances and friends whom he met, remarked that they thought him altered, without quite knowing how. Some men, whom he dined with, voted him not half as cheery as he used to be. The truth being that Jack felt as if he was not wholly there. To keep his thoughts fixed on those present was an impossibility. Every now and then, while seeming to listen to some choice scandal or racy story, his imagination carried him away to a sick-bed, where a man lay dying and a wife stood watching. As an excuse for his going early, he pleaded fatigue from the journey, premised that he had not yet become accustomed to dry land

again, and with the expressed certainty that he should be more himself on the morrow, went off to the hotel where he was staying.

He wanted to be alone, by himself, ridded of company, so that he could give full rein to the thoughts that were hurrying at top speed through his brain.

An indescribable sadness had taken possession of him. Mr. Clarkson's report of Robin's devotion, coupled with the account given him by Georgy in her letter, left him with no doubt but that the love once poured out upon him had been transferred to Christopher. And right it should be—only if it could have been at some less cost than the belief that he had deserted her—cast her aside ;—and he discontentedly reviewed the letter he had written her, thinking the best proof of how she had taken what he said lay in the fact, that the word he

had asked for had never been sent in answer. This drop of gall, added to his melancholy, but strengthened its bitter flavour. Ah, there was a good deal in life that we made sorrowful! Chances thrown away which we would give all we possessed to possess again. The same regret, he supposed, came in turn to everybody, only some suffered from ill-luck more than others—suffered deservedly, perhaps. Without saying that this was his case, Jack fell at once to compassionating Christopher. 'Poor fellow!' he sighed; 'he does not seem to have had much that was bad to answer for; and yet who could be in a more pitiful condition? His one great desire granted him; the wish of his life, Robin's love, given to him, and now he must leave her.'

Without clothing his thoughts with words, or even letting them take shape,

Jack went on probing deeper. Regret, compunction, remorse, were stirred within him until the measure of self-approbation seemed emptied altogether, and he was looking at the man he really was, unconsciously comparing himself with Christopher. It did not occur to him to wonder how little he was occupied by Robin. Death standing near seemed to hide her in its shadow. She was further removed from Jack than he had ever felt her. Without a thought of love, his heart lay within him as a stone. How was this? Why should it be? Had he ceased to care for her?

* * * * *

The same question might have been asked of Robin, to whom a few days later, while walking in the garden together, out of the sick-room from which she had enticed her, Georgy Temple suddenly said:

'Did they tell you—have you heard that my cousin Jack has come home?'

'Home! Here?'

'No, not here; in London, where he speaks of remaining.'

'Yes; does he?'

Robin said no more; for some moments thought no more. So completely had close companionship and long watching fixed her thoughts on Christopher, that it needed a positive effort now to take an interest in anything not relating to him.

Suddenly the words Georgy had said came back. Jack home! Jack near! Was it possible that she could be told this and not care? She who a thousand times had gone over the meeting that must of necessity some day occur between them, and the distress and pain it would give her.

Possessing a very accurate knowledge of

Jack's disposition, Robin had drawn upon her past experiences for the reproach he would feel towards her. Not a word had Christopher ever breathed of the letter in his possession; and Robin never questioned but the cause of Jack's absence had been that tear-stained, incoherent petition which she had entrusted her husband to send for her.

Bitterly had often come the thought that Jack had taken his dismissal very readily, refusing, withholding the one boon she had so desperately craved of him, that he would say he forgave her. Ah! forgiveness was not in Jack's nature. Forgiveness belonged to Christopher. But now all this storm of discontent was gone, and in its place indifference had come; so that it seemed to no longer matter whether he came or stayed away—whether they met, or were parted for ever.

* * * * *

'I told her,' Georgy said, repeating what had occurred to Mr. Cameron; but she hardly took any notice. She does not now, unless it happens to be something about Christopher. I could never have believed how wrapped up she has become in him; it seems as if in losing him the whole world is going from her

Mr. Cameron sighed.

'And he is so different,' he said; 'so calm, so cheerful, so resigned; interested in everything and everybody. You should have seen how his face lit up when I told him that Chandos had returned. "Has he," he said, and his voice sounded quite strong. "Now the only wish I had left will be gratified; I shall see him again. Yesterday it didn't seem possible. All the day I was thinking so much about him."'

Georgy looked her surprise.

'Really!' she said. 'I wonder why?'

'You must give me the address of his hotel, so that I may write to him to come down here. I am to ask him from Christopher. Dear fellow! He said so simply: "Tell him the request comes from me, and that he must not delay."'

'Perhaps it is about the building of the church,' suggested Georgy.

'I don't know; he did not say what it was about, and I did not ask him. He wanted the letter written, and that was enough for me.'

So the summons was sent; and with Jack, to receive it was to obey. Never had he started on a journey with so much alacrity. By the next train he was on his way to Wadpole.

* * * * *

Perhaps no better preparation for enter-

ing that sick-room could have been made than the thoughts which bore Jack company. He had spent much time during his homeward journey from India in disciplining himself to pursue a certain marked-out course of action. He had made plans for the present, and arrangements for the future. Suddenly He who disposeth had stretched out His hand, and lo, the project of that labour was melted away!

Was Christopher wishing to reproach him or to forgive him? Was it to exact any promise, or because of that desire which sick men often feel to be at peace with all the world before they die?

And then came the thought of Robin; how would she meet him? and what measure of the circumstances between them was known to those around?

Jack's heart beat strangely as, leaving

the carriage he had driven from the station in at the Lodge gate, he walked up the avenue. He had asked no questions of the few people he had seen; and they, in their surprise at his return, of the cause of which they never dreamed, had vouchsafed no information.

The glory of departing summer lay on all around, flecking the trees with russet and with gold. There was a hush of stillness in the air, which made the rustle of the leaves distinct each time the soft wind swayed the branches and fanned them overhead. Between the trees a stretch of green spread out afar, with cattle, prized for the rareness of their breed, dotted here and there, taking their ease.

Surely no other land could match the prosperous quiet of a scene like this! Jack had an English heart, with pride of

country at its very core; but now, as he went, all that he passed was lost to him, so strained were his eyes towards the house to catch a sight of it, and see the blinds still up, the windows open.

A sigh of relief escaped him as the servant who had watched his approach advanced to meet him.

'Won't you be pleased to take refreshment of some kind, sir?' he said, leading the way into a room where a well-spread table stood. 'Master thought, coming from London, you might feel the want of something.'

'No; I had all I needed before starting.'

'Master hopes, sir, that you'll please to excuse his not being in the way, but just at present he doesn't feel equal to seeing anybody. Poor old gentleman! 'tis a terrible cut up for him.'

'Naturally.'

'Mr. Christopher is being told that you've come. Should I inquire, sir, if he's ready?'

'Do.'

The man left him, to return, after a few minutes' delay, and say that Mr. Christopher was quite prepared to see him now.

He led the way. Jack followed him upstairs to a room the door of which was opened by someone who went out as he was admitted.

There, in a bed drawn over near the window, the prospect from which he could see, lay Christopher. By his side sat Robin.

Only a minute before, as the door was opening, at the thought that perhaps she was inside, that he should see her, Jack's blood had seemed to turn to fire; now already he had forgotten her—forgotten all else save that he stood in the dread presence of visibly approaching death.

She must have advanced to meet him, for they had shaken hands; and yet it seemed to him that he had not seen her, so riveted were his eyes on Christopher.

'It is very good of you to come so soon,' he began in his feeble voice. 'I knew you would come, but I hardly dared to expect you so early.'

Jack pressed the hand put into his.

'I cannot tell you how sorry I am to see you so ill,' he said earnestly.

'I am sure of that; there is no need to tell me. Of late I have so longed to see you again,—and you see the wish has been granted to me.'

While they were speaking Robin had brought over a chair and placed it at the bedside, then she went to a further window and stood looking out.

Christopher's eyes followed her.

'Robin,' he said, 'come over here near me; I miss you.'

She was at his side in an instant.

'I want to talk to you both together.'

And he looked at them, letting his eyes rest first on one and then on the other; and then he stretched out his hands, and, while holding theirs, said:

'God is very good to let us meet like this again. My great desire was to say what I want to tell you like this—when I could speak to you both here, with the hand of each in mine.'

Jack's face showed the pain he felt; he could find no voice to speak in: his heart and pulses thudded violently. Robin, pale, careworn, with the fountain of her grief run dry, listened in silence.

'You must forgive me,' Christopher

went on—it was to Jack that he was speaking—'for having in a way broken a promise I once gave you. I could not leave unspoken anything for her to learn when I am gone. Oh, how blessed now comes the thought that she trusted me!—that that same night, ignorant of what you had done, she told all to me! You know now, dear love, don't you, that I was witness of that scene about which I then feigned to know nothing?'

Involuntarily Jack's eyes were turned to Robin; hers were fixed on Christopher.

'It must not pain you,' he went on, 'anything I may say. It has no pain for me; only rejoicing to remember that you both showed me confidence—both listened to the voice which was stirring for good within you. The finger of that Hand, always stretched out to help us in our need,

was lain on both your hearts—a sacrifice was asked, a sacrifice made, a sacrifice accepted.'

His voice had sunk to a whisper; so great was his weakness that he had to wait for his lips to be moistened before he could continue.

After a time, with a feeble effort to take something from underneath his pillow, he showed them a packet which he would not let Robin open; but unfolding the paper took out two letters, the seals of which had not been broken.

'That is yours, Robin; and this'—turning to Jack—'belongs to you; neither of them have been touched or opened since they were written. As you then gave them to me, so I now deliver them back to you. That same evening I fastened them in this, and locked them in a box; and

there, side by side, they have ever since lain together.'

Mechanically Jack and Robin turned, and turned again, the letter each had been given. The sight of the hurried, hastily penned writing brought vividly back the circumstances of that repented of occasion. Humbled, heart-stricken, they turned towards Christopher. His face was smiling, his arms stretched wide as if to encircle them; from out his parted lips came faintly forth the word 'forgiven.'

Already Robin had sunk down kneeling with her face hidden. Jack, untried in sorrow as she had been, struggled for an instant; and then, perhaps for the first time since he was a lad, his emotion overcame him, and tears streamed from his eyes.

Ah! it is in moments such as these we

recognise that the image man was made after is divine. All he possessed, even life itself, Jack was ready to give, so that by it he could save Christopher.

Did Christopher by intuition guess this?

Exhausted he had sunk back, and there lay with his blissful eyes looking at the two heads bowed down on either side of him.

How long did they so remain? neither of the two could say; all that they knew was that of a sudden Christopher seemed to gather up his strength, and raise himself so that he took their hands again, and, they looking, saw as it were an angel-face turned heaven-ward to ask a blessing on them. His lips still moved, although—his voice sunken to a whisper—the words he said no longer could be heard; only at the last

they felt the hands he held he joined together, and while they still remained clasped, the spirit of Christopher passed away for ever.

CHAPTER XV.

THE stranger who visits Wadpole, and carries his steps a little further on to Uplands, is sure to be attracted by a name he hears coupled with many things he sees.

Blunt's cottages, Blunt's institute, the church, the schools, are all the work of Mr. Blunt, whose pride now is to be connected with every charity around.

No longer ashamed of his self-made position, nor—as of yore—of his humble origin; his boast now is that he was a

working man, and made his money with the hands they see—hands which he tells them laboured hard for years—hands which can labour still, as he has shown in the building of the church, raised to the memory of his son, and superintended by himself.

Always being added to, always improved, Uplands Church is the show-church of the neighbourhood. From far and near, for miles around, people come to its services.

Mr. Cameron is the rector. He is married to Georgy Temple, and is firmer than ever in that once scoffed-at conviction of being the most fortunate man in the world.

Perhaps there does not live a happier woman than Georgy. The once neglected men and women amongst whom she dwells, much as they approve of their rector, simply worship her, and listen to her teach-

ing with greater respect, because she is a good judge of a horse, and has such an eye for a dog.

Mr. Temple, contented in having his daughter near, seems infected with the desire to follow—at a distance—the footsteps of his son-in-law. He performs his own duty, and seems to find satisfaction in it; although there are many in Wadpole still ready to affirm that necessity, not choice, is the main spring of his actions, Mrs. Temple having declared that no curate shall put foot in the parish until she has married her daughter Dora.

Mr. Dorian Chandos, member for Wadpole, is one of the leading men in the county; a good landlord, a staunch friend, rich and poor respect him equally.

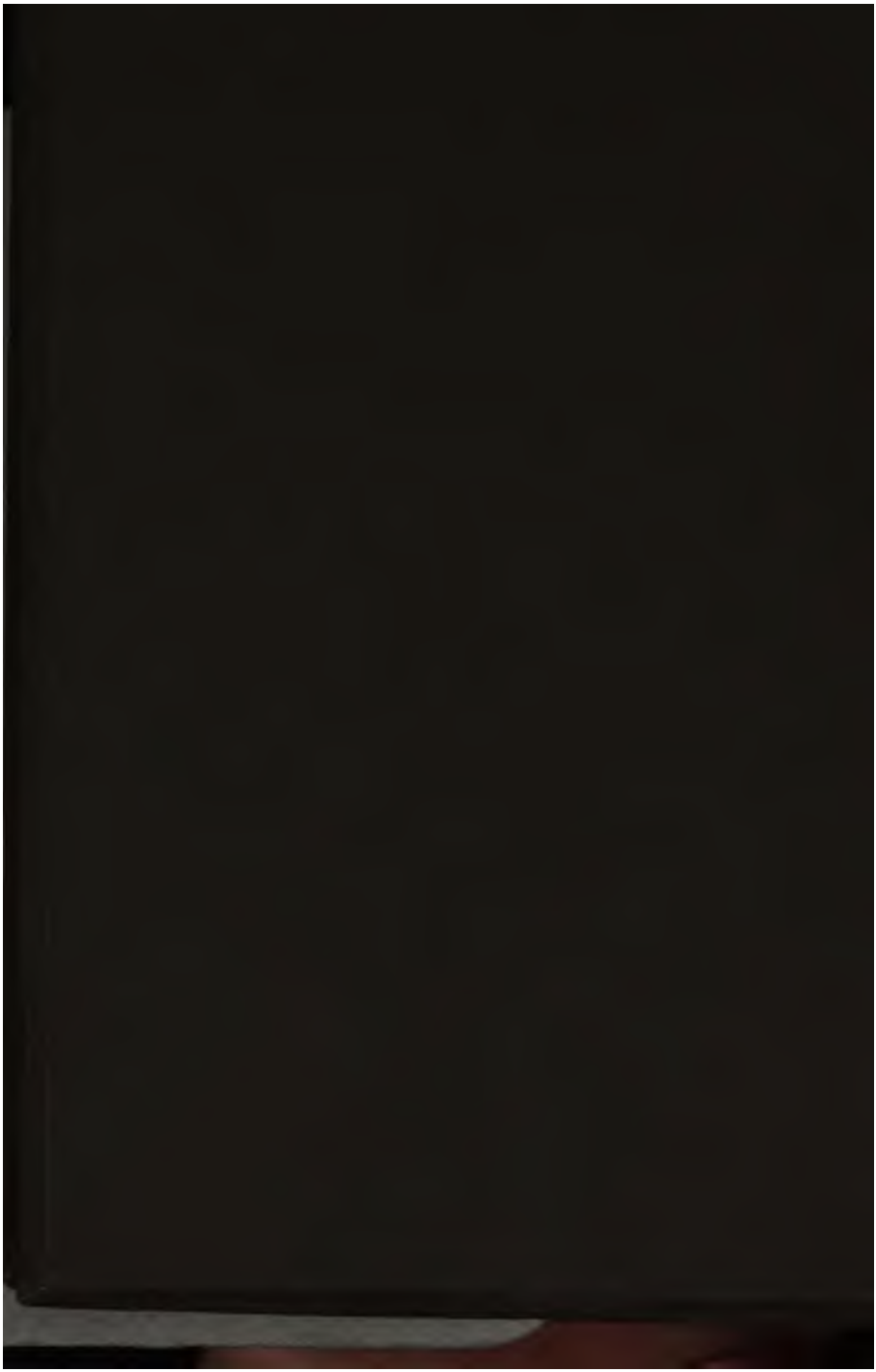
Wherever they go, he and his wife have the warmest welcome given them; indeed,

it would be hard to decide which is the greater favourite of the two — Jack or Robin.

Besides being a wife, Robin is a mother now; her eldest boy bears the much loved name of Christopher. In him, Mr. Blunt seems to see again his son; his greatest pride is to hear himself called 'Grandfather.'

One spot in Uplands Churchyard is always green and gay with flowers, which Robin and her children bring. And when the little ones have lain their posies down, they play around, while she stands looking —where the sun's last rays slant down— upon a plain white cross, inscribed:

To CHRISTOPHER.

THE END.

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J. W. & S.